

# **How TO LIVE Now or NEVER**

**alejandro de acosta**



# HOW *to* LIVE NOW *or* NEVER

ESSAYS *and* EXPERIMENTS  
2005–2013

*Alejandro de Acosta*

*How to Live Now or Never: Essays and Experiments*  
2005–2013

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*It is here esteemed contrary to the rules of art  
to represent anything cool and indifferent.*

– Hume, *Enquiry Concerning  
the Principles of Morals*



## NOTES

*A condensation of notes touching on many tropes of this collection, offered here in place of an introduction.*

*... el niño acepta, no compara*  
— Borges

*It is written by a butterfly for butterflies*  
— Wilde

## A

I want to wander off as I write, to do something other than take a position even when I seem to be doing so; to invoke proper names, even in the form of homage, without attaching my own to them in some familiar intellectual vampirism.

For that game to unfold, an essay should be a sketch, but not in the sense of a draft. Its wandering has to do with patience—with the calm breath that dwells in ambiguity or ambivalence, and perhaps at the end, some kind of skepticism. For what is wandered off from is the thesis, or rather serious expectations concerning the wielding of the thesis. Behind such seriousness I diagnose an anxious demand to align oneself, the countless *partis pris* (post-, anti-, -isms). In this way, in poor taste, prose can be littered with unexamined codewords, slogans, dull indices.

One could wander so far, wander so surreally, that the best way to express the imaginary places one has arrived at is to return to the thesis in the form of paradoxes, defending precisely the claims that seem most impossible or disagreeable to maintain. To refuse the contest of the thesis in order to witness its happy return in another game; to allow the thesis to be just another prose genre (a genre-within-a-genre, in this case).

To this end I prefer to regard the thesis (and its oddly formal companion, the title) as the most concentrated point of concentrated writing, thus making my essays strange relatives to novels in three lines, micrograms, and other forms of short poetry and prose. It would be terrible, due to aversion to the thesis, to end up suspicious of brevity as such. Long-winded on-message redundancy, paired with today's all-too-common self-plagiarism, are just as undesirable, and equally to be avoided.

So my interest in the essay-form remains aesthetic. That is, I thought I wanted to write essays because I found the form attractive. But once I began to compose them, I discovered that I was reporting on my own experiences and that the essay-form, as a laboratory for the examination and mutation of experience, was doing its work for me, or on me. The desire for gentleness and delicacy of theses (which unpredictably came to include their paradoxical qualities) led me back to

the terrain of *moralia*. Such is my own jovial *parti pris*, in which it doesn't matter if you don't get the joke.

## B

At the same time, just to say that I am not doing something could be a silly gesture—who is to be impressed by this polite song and dance? No one, of course. But it seems enough to say that I am refusing what my imaginary audience wants, and so still acknowledging the desires of past and future non-imaginary publics.

The apex of this art would be to sovereignly make them disappear to themselves, to gift them a new mask! If we are to play that game, the thesis must be a lure for meaning, a temptation to invest a tiny packet of words with great weight or depth—a desire that must be frustrated for meaning to emerge. For this to be other than painful, what must also be communicated is a ludic sensibility (that none of this is serious).

## C

The game is a game of personation, of putting on and taking off masks ('egoist', for example). Sometimes embodying a perfection of which Wilde wrote,

*the note of perfect personality is not rebellion, but peace, presenting the face of*

*one who is not wounded, or maimed, or worried, or in danger.*

It is Zhuangzi's

*intact person.*

But no mask is ever permanently on, so the perfect mask drifts off to become one fantastic pole, revealing the other as what is not yet or no longer a mask: rough edges, faults and fault lines; distracted, naturally climbing towards or falling away from perfection; awakening, falling asleep, for example. The rough edges of the dreaming self. The entire process is ethical and has as its goal something like what Hume gestures to in his explication of virtuous character, one

*entertained by his own thoughts.*

To be avoided: there where I am offended and so offensive, wounded and so wounding. The tasteless masque of the slave or the victim, its pathetic vindication.

## D

I dream of summoning up an array of acts I denominate as *seductive*. They may be classed, by those who are so concerned, as non-coercive, in that arguably they seem to affect only the actor.

These seductive acts are ultimately gentle demonstrations, modelizations of behavior that aim at a magnetic, passionate, attraction. (This *ultimately* should not confuse us as to the particular words or gestures involved, which could very well feel rough!) In this sense seduction would be a plea, as I conceive it, for imitation, sometimes, or, other times, on the order of:

*won't you join me in this activity?—for it is, it could be, fine.*

And this perhaps less because there is someone there who has in the depths of her being consented, but rather because someone is not there, rather someone has changed from being one to being another, and the mask of another says yes.

Seduction is to communicate, in speech or gesture,  
*imitate me!*

or just

*use me!*

*Use me:*

*render inappropriate what I appropriated.*

If there is no actor behind the act, to recognize this apparent hollowness or void of identity—which is paradoxically also to acknowledge the atomic nature of acts-in-a-void, from-a-void—registers that there is a difference here, in this tired ego, and you, impossible audience, are invited to reduplicate it. That is, explicitly I consent but implicitly, in the intimate folds, I vanish in the acts that we share. I dare call all that a *gift of organs*. Organs: well, why not? The extended act, what is held out, tangible and visible, the word and the gesture, is a dance of organs of perception, sensation, nutrition. But whereas consensus is the story of organisms and organizations, of their more or less explicit communication, of their finality, the gift of organs is to see this propriety undone, to undo it ourselves. *Use me*: it is no longer my supposed goals that are at stake, my plans. My desires! But I desire just now to be used and my imploding act shows just that. Its names are patience, consideration, gentleness. Please help me to finish undoing my ego, friend, lover, ally; please render these acts properly atomic.

And the organs are so given—the gift does not belong to an economy of exchange (if exchange requires a measure). It is an excessive gift through which I seek the intangible goods of honor or prestige—but I cannot expect this. Or rather I would be an egotist and an idiot if I did. The act would be calculated by a self-deceived ego: puerile.

For example: I have conceived of the superior form of humor as one that does not need to be funny. The dry wit, as I call it, holds out a funny act (speech or gesture) in the hopeless hope that someone gets the joke and is amused. But the joke neither needs reception nor is aimed at it. In this way the joker's ego becomes itself a joke, suspended in the act, its imitation, or its reception, in which it surely becomes something else. (The presupposition of another perspective without any certainty as to what is so perceived.)

*Imitate me:* Is this any different than *use me*? At one level it is: it is to say, do not touch the organs so held out. Make of them a simulacrum and dance away, repeating or innovating. I am not allowing myself to care how since in that I would be reborn as Caring Ego. At another level, there is pleasure in this reduplication, again never hoped for, just seized and affirmed where and if it should manifest. And here indeed *use my model* is no different than *use these organs*. It's just that some folks like to be touched more than others.

*Use me,*  
says a masochist.

*Use me,*  
says Schreber to God.  
*Use me,*

I say, offering my ear to another's speech, my gaze to their expressions and gestures, my consoling or affirming hand to their shoulder.

E

I have written elsewhere that any ethical or political position worth taking should be communicated in the form of a seduction.

I add here that what cannot be thought must be modeled through a passionate attraction, a lure for feeling.

**IBU PERFECT APE**

*An exhortatory poem written after reading aloud from the book bolo'bolo to a friend then known as Neda. (I am not sure what her name is now.) It was first published in the booklet In Simil Pattern (mufa::poema 06) in 2006.*

IBU, stop with these jokes: zombi-joke, monkey-joke,  
] robot-joke  
IBU, you are already perfect ape. You are perfect and ape!  
IBU dreaming of simil shapes, always with less possibilities  
IBU one or more superhero traits exchanged for less  
] possibilities

IBU, none of this is possible, be perfect ape  
IBU telepath, write down wish-plan for another BOLO  
IBU, I am talking to myself  
IBU dreaming I am of simil shapes  
IBU seek food and sleeping place, maybe home  
IBU first make yourself IBU self, disidentified  
IBU misidentified, unknown to mirror  
IBU ape, perfectly, in mirror pattern, talented at this  
IBU suggestive, prone to suggestion, suggest

IBU IBU not your ape name, ape naming ape  
IBU forget the maternal instinct of robot  
IBU undo the paternal instinct of zombi  
IBU enough filial instinct of monkey  
IBU IBU your ape name, name IBU, aping

IBU analyst, write or tell me wish plan for yet another BOLO  
IBU wish for BOLO  
IBU wish for BOLO  
IBU wish for BOLO

**IBU wish for BOLO**

**IBU wish for BOLO**

**ANARCHIST MEDITATIONS,**

*or:*

THREE WILD INTERSTICES  
*of* ANARCHISM *and* PHILOSOPHY

*An article first presented in 2009, then published in the journal Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies in 2010. The presentation was at an academic conference, the first and only time it occurred to me to present on these topics in such a space. I appreciate its sober discussion of such outlandish topics, from which the writer does not attempt to remain separate. At the same time, it's clear to me that the venue was not quite right, and it made more sense to take the discussion of such matters to those more intimately concerned with them. But that would have meant to write something other than an article. I therefore regard this as the document of an awkward transition. In one way or another, most of the other pieces gathered in this collection deal with practices or experiments of which the meditations discussed here are a subset.*

*Todo está ya en su punto,  
y el ser persona en el mayor.*

—Baltasar Gracián

*Conocer las cosas en su punto,  
en su sazón, y saberlas lograr.*

—Gracián (again)

### *Failure and the Third*

I dare to call certain turbulent interstices of anarchy and philosophy *wild*. I feel that there is a lot of activity there, but not (yet) along predictable lines. For some time now, those interested have been hearing about several other such interstices: tamer ones, from my point of view. Or at least more recognizable. So let us play the familiar game of theory and practice, that game in which we presuppose them as separate and seek to claim them reunited. From within the play of this game, the tame interstices are variations on the following moves: philosophers allude to anarchist practices; philosophers allude to anarchist theorists; anarchists allude to philosophers (usually in search of theory to add to the canon). What is missing in this schema, I note with interest, is anarchists alluding to

philosophical practices. These are the wild interstices: zones of outlandish contact for all concerned.

But there are other games to play, even if they are only innocent games of exposition. I think it is important and interesting to stop presupposing separation, to dissolve its painful distribution of thinking and action. That is, we might hazard the risky game (which is also an experience, an exercise) in which *there are no theories, no practices*; just more or less remarkable enactments of ways of life, available in principle to absolutely anyone, absolutely anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Anecdotally, these reflections have a double genesis. The first occurred some years ago, when I was asked at an anarchist gathering to participate in a panel on “Anarchism and Post-Structuralism”. It was around the time some began speaking of and writing about post-anarchism. The conversation failed, I think, in that no one learned anything. Of the four speakers, two were roughly in favor of engaging with post-structuralism and two against. I write *roughly* because we seemed to agree that *post-structuralism* is at best an umbrella term, at worst a garbage term<sup>2</sup> not acknowledged by most of the authors classed within it, and not particularly helpful in conversations such as that one. As if there really were two massive aggregates on either side of the *and* we were being asked to discuss! Indeed, the worst possible sense that something called post-anarchism could have would be the imaginary collusion of two crudely conceived imaginary aggregates. During the

discussion, a participant asked the panel a question: *how do post-structuralist anarchists organize?* Of course the question went unanswered, though some of us tried to point out that there just aren't, and cannot be, post-structuralist anarchists in the same sense that there are or may be anarcho-communists or anarcha-feminists or primitivists, etc. The operative reason was that our interlocutor seemed to be (involuntarily?) imagining post-structuralism as a form of theory, and anarchism primarily as a form of practice with no spontaneous or considered theory of its own. This is a variant of the familiar schema of separation, in which theory offers the analysis that informs practices, a.k.a. 'organizing'. No go.

That night, I also posed a question, one that went unanswered: *is there a third?* I meant to ask both about the status of anarchism and post-structuralism as massive, clumsy imaginary aggregates, and also about the presupposed separation in their implicit status as forms of practice and theory. Or perhaps merely to hint at the unacknowledged efficacy of the *and*, its silent labor, its gesture towards possible experiences. What I have to say here is my own attempt to answer that question as provocatively as possible. I will begin with this claim (which I think does not presuppose separation): it is precisely the apparent political failures of what I am now glad to have done with referring to as post-structuralism that could make certain texts and authors interesting. And it is precisely the supposed theoretical failures of what it is still a

little silly to call anarchism that could make its peculiar sensibilities attractive.

Indeed, the great and continuing interest of anarchism for philosophers (and for anarchists, if they are willing to learn this lesson) could be that it has never successfully manifested itself as a theoretical system. Every attempt at an anarchist system is happily incomplete. That is what I suppose concerned our interlocutor that night: he was worried, perhaps, about the theoretical insufficiency of anarchism compared with what appeared to be an overwhelming array of theories and concepts on the other side. In this anxious picture, the array seeks to vampirically attach itself to whatever practice, interpreting, applying itself to, *dominating*, ultimately, its motions. *Theories without movements: run!* I would prefer to invert the terms and claim the apparent theoretical weakness of anarchism as one of its greatest virtues. For its commonplaces (direct action, mutual aid, solidarity, affinity groups, etc.) are not concepts but forms of social practice. As such, they continually, virally, infect every even remotely extraparliamentary or grassroots form of political action. And, beyond politics, they compose a kind of interminable reserve of social intelligence. In all this they neither require a movement to become manifest nor compose one by default of tendentially existing. In this sense, what anarchism offers to philosophers (to the philosophers any of us are or might be) is that it has been and remains primarily a way of life. Its asystematicity and its

persistent recreation as a way of life probably account for the fact that anarchism, as theory, has never been incorporated into or as an academic discipline.<sup>3</sup>

Anarchism acts as an untimely echo of how philosophy was once lived, and how, indirectly and in a subterranean fashion, it continues to be lived. And, paradoxically, we might learn something about how it is lived by reference to philosophical practices.

### *Dramatization: Wild Styles*

Practices, or simply philosophy as a way of life: that is the second genesis of what I have to say here. This idea crystallized in studying, of all things, the ancient Stoics. Seeking to give a (pedagogical) sense to Stoic logic, physics, and ethics as a lived unity and not as components of what they already called a “theoretical discourse”,<sup>4</sup> I had recourse to the elaboration of the practice of spiritual exercises by Pierre Hadot. He describes them as follows:

*practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them.*<sup>5</sup>

Or, again:

*The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it.*<sup>6</sup>

Briefly, it's that every statement that is still remarkable in the fragments and doxographical reports is so in light of its staging (dramatization, theatricalization) as part of a meditative practice that might have been that of a Stoic.

Hadot offers several examples from the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius demonstrating that logic and physics, the purportedly theoretical components of Stoicism, were already and immediately part of ethical practice. Logic as a “mastery of inner discourse”<sup>7</sup>:

*always to define or describe to oneself the object of our perception so that we can grasp its essential nature unadorned, a separate and distinct whole, to tell oneself its particular name as well as the names of the elements from which it was made and into which it will be dissolved.*<sup>8</sup>

Physics as “recognizing oneself as part of the Whole”<sup>9</sup>, but also the practice of seeing things in constant transformation:

*Acquire a systematic view of how all things change into one another; consistently apply your mind to, and train yourself in, this aspect of the universe.*<sup>10</sup>

I contend that such spiritual exercises are theories *dramatized* as subjective attitudes. As the pivot of the whole system or at least of its comprehensibility as such, the role of logic and physics for the Stoics must have been precisely that of a training for ethical thought and action. But in some sense the converse is even more compelling: subjective attitudes, their theater, seem to secrete theory as a detritus in need of being taken up again—precisely in the form of a new or repeated exercise, a renewed dramatization. Setting aside the labyrinthine complications of the entanglement with what is still badly understood as Fate, I would like to retain this much of Stoic ethics in my anarchist meditations: to find if there is anything to affirm in what confronts us, what we encounter. Concluding a recent essay, I shared a desire *to affirm something, perhaps all, of our present conditions, without recourse to stupid optimism, or faith.* I would like to speculatively expand on the practice of such affirmations. As Gilles Deleuze once put it:

*either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us.<sup>11</sup>*

What we encounter cannot but provoke thought; if it can, meaning, if we allow it to, there is something to affirm, and this affirmation is immediately joyful. How we might thoughtfully allow events, places, actions, scenes, phrases—*what happens*

*to us*, in short—to unfold in the direction of joy is the explicit or implicit question of every spiritual exercise.

I propose, then, an interlinked series of fantastic spiritual exercises: meditations for anarchists—or on anarchy. They have, I suppose, been implicit in every significant anarchist discourse so far (including, of course, the many that have not called themselves anarchist). They have been buried, indirect, assumed but unstated, in these discourses. Or at least in much of their reception. In each of these three forms (or styles) of exercise what is pivotal is some use of the imagination—at least the imaginative-ideational uptake, Stoic *phantasia* or *phantasma*, of written or spoken discourse, and of what is given to thought in experience.<sup>12</sup> So, we are concerned here with experiential dispositions, attitudes that at first seem subjective but are ultimately prior to the separation of subject and object, and perhaps even of possible and real.

Whatever happens, these exercises are *available*. I will not opine on their ultimate importance, especially not on their relevance to existing movements, groups, strategies, or tactics. In what fashion and to what degree any of these exercises can be applied to another activity—if that is even possible—is ultimately up to any of us to decide upon in the circumstances that we find ourselves in, or through situations that we create. The status of these meditations is that of a series of experiments, or experiences, whose outcome

and importance is unknown at the outset and perhaps even at the conclusion.

I will have recourse in what follows to texts and authors that preceded what is now called anarchism, or were, or *are*, its difficult contemporaries, so as to underline that what matters in anarchist meditations are the attitudes that they make available, not any actual or possible theory or group that they may eventually secrete. The secret importance of anarchy is the short-circuit it interminably introduces between such attitudes and action, and back—what is badly conceived as spontaneity. (Or worse, *voluntarism*, in the words of our enemies ...)

Perhaps, then, the truly compelling reason to call the three forms of meditation *wild styles* is that anarchists have no *archon*, no school, no real training in or modeling of these activities outside of scattered and temporary communities and the lives of unusual individuals. But they can and do happen: interminably, yes, and also informally, irregularly, and unpredictably. That is their interest and their attraction.

### *First Wild Style: Daydream*

A Daydream may take the form of a *meditative affirmation* that informs how we might read so-called utopian writers. Of these I will discuss the absolutely most fascinating. It is Fourier, with his taxonomy of the passions; with his communal phalansteries; with his tropical new earth, *aigresel* oceans, and kaleidoscopic solar system; ultimately, with his Harmonian future. What are we to do today with such a discourse? A version of this first wild style is beautifully laid out in the following remarks by Peter Lamborn Wilson:

Fourier's *future* would impose an injustice on *our present*, since we Civilizees cannot hope to witness more than a foretaste of Harmony, if it were not for his highly original and somewhat mad eschatology. [...] One of the things we can do with Fourier's system is to hold it within our consciousness and attention in the form of a mandala, not questioning whether it be literally factually true, but whether we can achieve some sort of "liberation" through this strange meditation. The future becoming of the solar system, with its re-arrangement of planets to form dances of colored lights, can be visualized as a tantric adept uses a yantra of cosmogenic significance, like a Sufi meditation on "photisms" or series of visionary lights, to focus and integralize our own individual realization of the potential of harmony within us, to overcome our "prejudices"

against matter, which is represented to us as a vile principle” by philosophers and priests.<sup>13</sup>

From which I would like to retain at least the following: first, we can affirm nothing in the present unless we acknowledge that the future is unthinkable, unimaginable. Fourier did write, after all, that if we sorry Civilizees could grasp the ramifications of the entire Combined Order, we would be immediately struck dead.<sup>14</sup> (This, by the way, seems to be why he was more given to examples about Harmonian banquets than ones about Harmonian orgies.) So, with respect to direct action, his intention is clear enough: one does not build Harmony as such, because it is unimaginable; one builds the commune, the phalanstery. (That is why so much of *The Theory of the Four Movements*, for example, is dedicated to a discussion of transitional phases, e.g. “Guaranteeism”).<sup>15</sup> This practice is focused, however, through a contemplation in which we are not planning for a future that is, after all, unforeseeable; we are dreaming, fantasizing, but in a peculiarly concentrated way, acting on ourselves in the present.

Secondly, setting aside the future, one can somehow meditate on Fourier’s system. And not just the system as totality; perhaps the most effective form of this meditative affirmation that I can report on is that which focuses on one single and exceptionally absurd element of Fourier’s speculations: for example, the *archibras*, a prehensile tail he claims humans will develop, good, as Lamborn Wilson notes, for

fruit-picking as well as orgies. Or the sixteen kinds of strawberries, or the lemonade ocean, or the anti-giraffe.<sup>16</sup> Fourier is as dumbfounding when he describes the industrial armies of Harmony as he is when he suddenly reveals one of these strange Harmonian monads to his audience.

It seems to me that Lamborn Wilson suggests an entirely different mode of reading and experiencing Fourier's writings than either the impatient critique of so-called scientific socialism or the predictably tolerant pick-and-choose of the other socialists and anarchists. To focus on what is systematic, or appears to be so, in Fourier, is to try to recreate for ourselves his precise derangement, to train our thinking in the paths of his mad logic, the voice of his desires, without for all that believing in anything. Especially Harmony. As he wrote: "passionate attraction is the interpreter of nature". I will accept this only if it can be agreed that interpretation is already an action, on ourselves first of all. (For example, it might be a healthy use of the same imaginative faculties that many of us squander on video feeds of one sort or another.)

A similar meditative affirmation could allow one to make good use of P.M.'s infamous zerowork tract *bolo'bolo*. The text opens with a short predictive narrative about the "substruction of the planetary work machine" by the construction of small autonomous communes or *bolos* networked together into the global *bolo'bolo*. We are, by the way, twenty-two

years too late; *bolo'bolo* should have emerged in 1988. The bulk of this tract, however, is taken up by a series of systematic elements that may become themes for Daydreams. It is the ideographic sign language of *bolo'bolo*, *asa'pili*, the series IBU, BOLO, SILA, TAKU... each coupled with an invented ideograph. As with the hexagrams of the *Classic of Changes*, each heading encapsulates and illustrates a concept with a simple sign. Imagine the use of this artificial *lingua franca*: the ideographs and odd bisyllabic words could aid a certain meditative translation. IBU is and is not an ego; NIMA is and is not beliefs; TAKU is and is not private property; YAKA is and is not a duel. And so on. Confronted, then, with egos, beliefs, private property, or duels, I may always perform an exercise that translates them to *asa'pili*. This means asking, speculating on, the question: and what would do we do with all this in *bolo'bolo*? This language is said to be of a future and yet we are already using it, making new sense or even new worlds of sense with it.

The second systematic series occurs only once: it is an incredible list of sample *bolos*.

*In a larger city, we could find the following bolos:*

*Alco-bolo, Sym-bolo, Sado-bolo, Maso-bolo, Vigi-bolo,  
Les-bolo, Franko-bolo, Italo-bolo, Play-bolo, No-bolo,  
Retro-bolo, Thai-bolo, Sun-bolo...<sup>17</sup>*

It is again a linguistic operation at first, which is obvious since so many of these are puns. Once we are amused, the imagina-

tion begins its playful reverie. Once the suffix takes on consistency, we are dreaming other dreams. Imagine, not just Sado-bolo and Maso-bolo, but the relations between them. What are the parties in Dada-bolo like? The art of Tao-bolo? The dialect of Freak-bolo? As with the punctual things, events, or practices denoted by the terms of *asa'pili*, we have some initial sense, but our imagination is pushed to a new and more voluptuous level of complication and creation in conceiving each *bolo*, its inner workings, and the interrelations, or lack thereof, among *bolos*.

In neither case is there anything to believe in. Certainly not *bolo'bolo*! I maintain rather that to gather and concentrate one's thought process using these signs or examples is to accept their provocation, to undertake a deviation, *détournement*, of the imaginative flux. In so doing we find, paradoxically, that we have names for otherwise unimaginable relations. We are in an even better position to do so than when the book first appeared since, according its chronology, *bolo'bolo* should have already come about. So the more credulous among us, those unhappy souls awaiting some anarchist version of 2012 or the Apocalypse of John, will be stumped and disappointed. It can no longer be read as a book concerning (do please laugh here) 'the current conjuncture'. Two mostly unhappy decades have returned it to its fetal form: a wish, a mad dream, that models its madness in an exemplary fashion, precisely by drawing us into its codes. Each ideogram, each

*bolo*'s name, is a monad. To meditatively grasp it is to attain a perspective on the otherwise impossible: to be a witness to *bolo'bolo*. It is only when we hopelessly use these monads that they can have an effect on our thinking-in-the-event: a healthy use of what Bergson called *la fonction fabulatrice*, perhaps even of what Freud conceived as the wish-fulfillment involved in dreams.

Another sort of Daydream, the *meditative negation*, manifests in a similar way, as a summoning up of powerful, almost unthinkable images of destruction, specifically of consumption. I consider this strange passage by Max Stirner to be paradigmatic:

Around the altar rise the arches of the church and its walls keep moving further and further out. What they enclose is *sacred*. You can no longer get to it, no longer touch it. Shrieking with the hunger that devours you, you wander around about these walls and search for the little that is profane. And the circles of your course keep getting more and more extended. Soon that church will embrace the whole world, and you will be driven out to the extreme edge. Another step and the *world of the sacred* has conquered: you sink into the abyss. Therefore take courage while there it is yet time, wander about no longer in the profane where now it is dry feeding, dare the leap and rush the gates into the sanctuary

itself. If you *devour the sacred* you have made it your own. Digest the sacramental wafer and you are rid of it.<sup>18</sup>

This is perhaps the most excessive of many such passages in *The Ego and its Own*. What is the status of this discourse? Just who is speaking here? What *I* is addressing me, presenting its ideas as my own? What is the altar, the church, its walls? What is the sacred exactly? What is the *hunger* referred to here? The *courage*? What does this apparently metaphorical act of eating entail in practice? As I have posed them, abstractly, these questions are unanswerable. I propose rather that the interest of passages such as these, their significance in Stirner's text, is that, functioning as a model, they allow one to project a parallel thought pattern onto one or more given sets of circumstances. This meditation could help me to divest myself of my allegiance to a stupid political group that I have made the mistake of joining; or it could save me from a noxious commonplace of sexual morality. In each case I would find the sacred element, identify its will to power, feel my impotence for a moment (*hunger*) and then strike with courage, undoing the sacrificial logic that has possessed me.

The difference between meditative affirmation and negation is that in affirming I actively imagine a future that I do not take to be real; I explore its details to act on my own imagination, on my thought process, to contract other habits. In negation, as in affirmation, there is no future, just this

present I must evacuate of its meaning. This meditation is a voiding process, a clearing of stupidities. It is what I do when I can find nothing to affirm in the present.

That is not the only form a meditative negation can take. Throughout *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner also deploys countless brief, pithy phrases that are not imagistic, but rather almost speech acts, cases of a kind of disruptive direct action in discourse:

*I do not step shyly back from your property, but look upon it always as my property, in which I need to 'respect' nothing. Pray do the like with what you call my property!*<sup>19</sup>

*I do not love [the world], I annihilate it as I annihilate myself; I dissolve it.*<sup>20</sup>

I do not know what could possibly follow such statements, though something must. These phrases could be ironically spoken aloud to a coarse interlocutor as the mark of a necessary distance; they could also be thought silently to oneself, as so many available elements of an egoist *tetrapharmakon* that could recall us to ourselves in even the most alienating moments.<sup>21</sup> The I that speaks in Stirner's text is more often than not offered as a common property, that is to say, not a property at all. It is a model, a case. It is there to be taken up, imitated, if we have the courage to be the confessed egoists we could be. Stirner was not describing the world, he was acting on it; so we too might act if we study and train ourselves in

such imaginary and discursive exercises. Like anarchism, egoism cannot be taught, only modeled and perhaps imitated.

### *Second Wild Style: Field Trip*

Although careful and generous acts of reading are vital to anarchist meditations, the exercises I am describing could also take the form of concentrations of thought developed not through engagement with written or spoken discourse but with the materiality of places. In affirmative or negative meditations, the question is that of another attitude, another tone of thought, another voice. And reading bizarre books is only one way to achieve it. A second form of exercise, the Field Trip, is a kind of *speculative anthropology of geographical spaces*. I will elaborate it through a detailed examination of one example, both for its richness and because I suppose many of my readers are unfamiliar with its source, a recent text from the sometime proponent of a *nihilist communism*. In a tone sometimes echoing Bakunin, sometimes Bataille, Frère Dupont, the pseudonymous author of *Species Being*, proposes that revolt is a sort of anthropological constant. It corresponds not so much to the organizations that seek to bring it about, or at least stimulate and channel it, but rather to an existential dimension of the human. Borrowing

from another lexicon, I would say that for Dupont revolt is anthropogenetic.

*The untheorized and non-included aspects of human existence is [sic] our platform.<sup>22</sup>*

I suppose the term *platform* is used here with tongue fully in cheek. What is this ironic project, then?

*Our purpose is to develop a feral subject...<sup>23</sup>*

Very well: how is this subject *developed*?

Setting aside, perhaps even ignorant of, the procedures of scientific anthropology or archeology, Frère Dupont enters an archeological site in the East of England and reports:

It is noon on the Tenth of May. The year is Two Thousand and Six. I am crouching, my hands on the floorstone, in Pit One of Grime's Graves, a retrieved neolithic flint mining complex in Norfolk's Breckland. I have chosen this place to begin my investigation into the tendency within society to modify itself through the chosen activities that it undertakes in response to the perceived limits of itself. I have asked myself whether this tendency of transformation out of stability is explicable in terms of a motivational sense of lack and/or a sense of abundance.<sup>24</sup>

The question Dupont is asking could be understood to belong to political philosophy, ethics, anthropology, or any number of other disciplines. It is also, of course, a variant of the old anarchist question about the inception of the State-form and

authoritarian politics: the institutionalized concentration of power.<sup>25</sup> This text bears with it the rare sense of a situated thought (“I have chosen this place”), the unusual idea that it matters *where* one is when one thinks; or, again, the fantastic intuition that one can conceive of the activities that have unfolded in a place, even *thousands of years later*:

I am crouching in Pit One of the complex. It is dark because the custodians of the site have put a roof over the site, but four thousand years ago, at midday, on a day like today in bright summer light, the chalk walls would be dazzlingly intense. To increase this effect the miners built angled walls from the chalk spoil at the surface of the shaft to further reflect light down into the galleries. My first impressions are of the miners’ appreciation for the actual process of mining as an activity in itself, which they must have valued in their society above the flint that was mined. Also, I felt an awareness of their creation of an architecture, their carving out of underground spaces, and the separations and connections between these and the world above. Somewhat self-consciously, I crouch at the centre of the shaft and announce my short, prepared thesis, “organization appears only where existence is thwarted”.<sup>26</sup>

The three key components of this exercise seem to be location in an unfamiliar and significant place (*I am crouching*), affective engagement with the history and arrangement of

the space (*my first impressions... I felt an awareness*), and the conscious, explicit introduction of what would otherwise be an abstract thesis into that experience (*I... announce*). I suggest that in so doing an aleatory element is introduced into thought, a tendency that unfolds, at least in this case, in solitude. Perhaps the place and its intuitive reconstruction act on speculation as a sort of externalized primary process, inflecting or declining it. It is an analytic moment. Not: what does this thesis mean? But: what does it mean that *I* said it *here*? Dupont offers up the thesis to the mute walls of the pit. And then something happens: new thought. The thesis thickens, taking on a new consistency.

Organization appears only where existence is thwarted [...] And existence appears only where organization is thwarted. But is this because the appearance of existence-in-revolt is a negatively constituted movement (a mere inversion of what is, a substantiation of the possibilities of the form), or is it an indication of a crisis within organization, the breakdown of the holding/defining of the scene—or rather, is the recurrence of existence-counter-to-present-structure an intimation of organization yet to come? The question here concerns capture, and return—the possibility of getting back to a previous stage where the problems of any given structure, or structure itself, have yet to appear.<sup>27</sup>

What Dupont discovered, perhaps, is some way to imaginatively recreate precisely what is lost of prehistoric peoples—their anarchy: a kind of vanished attitude modeled anew. Dupont does not claim to speak the truth of those peoples. Who could ever claim to know what they thought? Or even if they experienced thought as a relatively autonomous faculty, the presupposition, by the way, of all our amusing contentions about theory? Rather, speculating in a place that is still somehow theirs, and letting the speculation remain what it is—a hallucination, ultimately—she or he moves to a speculative or archeological reconstruction of our own problems. Dupont is able to speculate on some Neolithic transformation from existence to organization (whatever else this means, I suppose it has to do with the stabilization of proto-states, ritual structures, divisions of labor, etc.) insofar as she or he locates, imaginatively, analogous or even genealogically related elements in our present. Namely, the vast, unthought but available, background of the thesis! I might encapsulate that background by reference to a feeling: the terrible sense that the group one is in is becoming rigid, static, that a hierarchy, hierogamy, or hierophany is developing where initially only some sort of kinship or friendship existed. The place (here, the pit) concretizes, materializes, or grounds thought in a provisional, momentary, but remarkable way. Could this be the birth of the feral subject?

Elsewhere in the book Dupont quotes Krishnamurti:

*Meditation is to find out if there is a field which is not already contaminated by the known.<sup>28</sup>*

Whatever this statement could have meant in its original context, I understand Dupont to be suggesting that we always need new practices of thought, new contemplations, that habituate us to overcoming our profoundly limited common sense about what is human, what the human or its societies can do and be. The *field*, then, in this example is both the pit and the attitude or wishes one brings there—though the latter may only become evident in the pit.

There is, in short, a tentative anthropology here<sup>29</sup>, and it is overtly speculative and intuitive. The interest of its statements lies not in their truth-value but in their importance, their success—their felicity, as one says of a performative utterance. They are felicitous if they can meditatively restage some or all of a fantastic anthropogenetic moment in a present itself rendered fantastic.

### *Third Wild Style: Psychogeography*

A third wild style bears as its name a Situationist term, which they defined as follows:

*the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals.<sup>30</sup>*

I mean it somewhat differently, however, since the question is not merely to understand effects, but to act on them, to generate other effects inasmuch as one becomes capable of experiencing places and spaces differently. One could view this style as a complex combination of the first (affirmation especially) and the second (though the speculative anthropology here refers not to the past but to a perspective on our world). A first simple form of Psychogeography could take up, for example, the long lists Kropotkin made of what in his present already manifested mutual aid: public libraries, the international postal system, cooperatives of every sort.<sup>31</sup> Kropotkin argued that mutual aid is an evolutionary constant, as generic and vital as competition, or what was called the struggle for existence. But we would be mistaken if we thought his books, essays, speeches, etc. had as their only rhetorical mode the one perhaps most evident on a first reading, that of scientific proof. His *examples*, his repeated and lengthy enumerations of factual cases of mutual aid, offer up an entirely new world, an uncanny symptomatology of a familiar world. It is our world, seen through a new and clear lens.<sup>32</sup> One could then travel to the places revealed in this new world, buildings or events, and meditate on the activity there so as to eventually grasp what is anarchist about them immediately and not potentially. I am referring to what is colloquially called *hanging out*. Going to the public library, for example, for no other reason than to witness what in it is anarchic—or, again, to a potluck. This

practice involves another way of inhabiting familiar spaces. It brings out what in them is uncannily, because tendentially, anarchic. It multiplies our sites of action and engagement and could shape our interventions there.

Those interested could expand the range of this exercise, making the goal not only arrival at the sites of mutual aid (or other anarchic activities), but also the journey. Here again a Situationist term is relevant: the *dérive*, that *experimental behavior* of wandering across an urban space with no determinate destination. I suppose that if one has begun to master the affirmation of certain places as anarchic, one could begin expanding the range of the exercise, meditating as one walks or rides a bicycle or bus, affirming now forms of movement, escape, or evasion, as well as creative flights of fancy. Soon many places in urban space will emerge, detached from their everydayness, as remarkable: places of intensity, or of virtual anarchy. (I think here, for example, of the great significance some friends put on visiting certain garbage dumpsters.)

Indeed, it is likely that Fourier's preferred examples may have emerged in just this way. Reading his finest descriptions of Harmony, we find innumerable *parades*. He plans Harmonian processions:

#### PARADE SERIES

*In a societary canton all the members of the industrial phalanx [...] are divided into 16 choirs of different*

*ages; each choir is composed of 2 quadrilles, one of men and one of women, making a total of 32 quadrilles, 16 male and 16 female, each with its distinctive banners, decorations, officers and costumes, both for winter and summer.*<sup>33</sup>

It is strange and lovely to suppose that all of this began with the solitary tradesman Charles Fourier looking on as a military parade passed by, spontaneously inventing his version of this exercise by asking himself: what can we do with the passions set to work in this array? It seems these people like costumes, display, fanfare, and ordered group movements. How do these passions fit in Harmony, given that the constraint in thinking harmonically is to affirm every passion? Once the question is asked, our experience reveals the details to be meditatively rearranged. For Fourier, parades are not only great fun; they also presage the serial organization of the Combined Order.

*All this pomp may be thought unnecessary to the cultivation of flowers and fruits, wheat and wine, etc., but baubles and honorific titles do not cost anything, and they are incitements to greater enthusiasm in the work of the Series.*<sup>34</sup>

*You will come in the end to recognize that there are no bad or useless passions, and that all characteristics are good in themselves, that all passions must be intensified, not moderated.*<sup>35</sup>

Psychogeography could show us where each passion, intensified, may bloom.

One night in the mid-nineties I had dinner with Peter Lamborn Wilson. We spoke about Fourier and he told me of a group of friends who had set off from New York into Canada in an expedition that had as its goal to trigger the birth of the Northern Crown, that *shining ring of light*, which, in Fourier's system, *will appear after two centuries of combined order*.<sup>36</sup> I do not remember all the details, but, since it has been fifteen years, and the Northern Crown has yet to emerge, I am led to wonder what this journey could have meant for its participants. I am reminded here of the great and catastrophic Tupi migrations of the sixteenth century documented by Hélène Clastres: ambiguous wanderings of whole peoples who abandoned a sedentary way of life and danced off (literally!) in search of a land of immortality that they expected to find in the Andes or across the Atlantic.<sup>37</sup> Or so it is said. We read of such journeys and perhaps conceive of them as pointless—fanatical, even. We suppose, perhaps, that they were primarily religious, missing what is remarkable about the absolute desertion of agricultural labor, marriage customs, etc. Religion might be the operative discourse, and prophetism the power mechanism, but the lived practice seems like something else entirely:

*The quest for the Land-Without-Evil is [...] the active denial of society. It is a genuinely collective asceticism*<sup>38</sup>

Should we say the poor Tupi were duped by their own prophets? What if the journey were its own reason? How did the Tupi experience what Clastres calls the “auto-destruction” of their own societies? What could the wanderers Lamborn Wilson told me of have felt and thought as they made their way north?<sup>39</sup>

### *Interstices*

Let me return to the question *how do post-structuralist anarchists organize?* I have suggested that what perhaps went unthought in it was the presupposition of separation. In this case that meant that the prized goal of the game, the theory-practice intersection, ought to be (to embody or resemble) organizing or an organization. Here I recall Dupont’s thesis: *organization appears where existence is thwarted.* Could we replace that last word with the phrase *separated from itself*?

Indeed, my three wild styles concern forms of existence that are more and less than organizations, or, to be direct, *organisms*, since in the unconscious hylomorphic background of the schema, theory is the soul, practice is the body, and progress is the organism’s health. To maintain that anarchist meditations are interstitial is to propose that something or someone thrives and swarms ahead of, behind, among, inside of, and between the slow-moving theory-practice com-

pounds that we call organizations. The vital question is: do organizations ever do anything at all? Or are they something like remnants, the clumsy carapaces of what has been and is already being done? David Hume wrote:

*The chief benefit which results from philosophy arises in an indirect manner, and proceeds more from its secret insensible influence, than from its immediate application.*<sup>40</sup>

A *secret insensible influence*: that is all I would claim for my wild styles. They are good practices, and good practice. They do not dictate action; action is its own reason and its own model. But they have had a long-standing, indirect, and insensible influence on what anarchists and many others in fact do.

Unlike a theory that purposely or accidentally posits an ideal state or a goal, they have no implicit or explicit teleology. I have long felt, and remain convinced, that there is nothing to be gained by positing a goal for action other than in the most irreducibly local sense (and even then!). Although I have my reasons for maintaining this near-metaphysical proposition, I will restrict myself here to underlining the contemporary phenomenon of non-ideological political actions, which could nearly all be called *tactics without strategies*. Or even: punctual acts in the course of detaching themselves from the tactical realm of militant and militarized politics. I prefer not to think such actions as practices in need of theoretical interpretation. If there is anything to praise in them, it is that these

actions are wild experiments: *what happens when we do this?* They install themselves, impossibly, I admit, on the side of *existence*, and attempt to remain there.

These wild styles ought, eventually, to put into question every political project—first, as project, and, again, as political.<sup>41</sup> That is their virtue, or at least their contribution to virtue. Whatever effects they may or may not have, they exemplify *in thought* that aspect of anarchist practice called *direct action*. The famous and pathetic theses of the innate goodness of humans or of a future utopia have perhaps no value other than their role as themes for meditation and affirmation in the present. Hume, again:

*The chief triumph of art and philosophy: it insensibly refines the temper, and it points out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain, by a constant bent of mind, and by repeated habit.*<sup>42</sup>

This sort of direct action, as it infuses our lives, may succeed or fail. To the extent that it succeeds, we are on the way to anarchy. To the extent that it fails, it succeeds as well, though in a more local way. We have *bent* our mind, as Hume wrote, and made life *amusing*.<sup>43</sup>

## NOTES

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1. I feel strongly about those last two phrases. But I would add that such experiments should interest us in philosophy outside of universities and anarchism—better, anarchy—beyond activist groups.
2. I add this note upon discovering, since the first publication of the article, that many do not seem to share the definition I once learned for *garbage term*. A garbage term is so called when it comes to be used indiscriminately to refer to a variety of things, as sundry items may be indiscriminately placed in a garbage container. The phrase does not necessarily have a negative connotation.
3. Cf. David Graeber's remarks in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, 2–7. One might also consider here Lacan's theory of the four discourses, proposed, among other places, in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*: first, in his problematization of the status of psychoanalysis in its relation to the university discourse (there are interesting parallels with what I have written about anarchist theory); secondly, in light of the connections he implies between the hysterical discourse, the master's discourse, and revolutionary movements. To show the singular status of the analyst's discourse, Lacan often provoked his audience by wondering aloud if there were any analysts. My way of

adopting this humorous provocation would be to ask if there are any anarchists. Finally, I recall here Monsieur Dupont's text on experience:

*Nobody can be an anarchist in the sense that the ideology of anarchism proposes* (*Nihilist Communism*, 202).

4. That is, philosophical *logos*. See Diogenes Laertius, in *The Stoics Reader*, 8. I was trying to teach that these spiritual exercises cannot be taught, only modeled and perhaps imitated.
5. *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 6. The discursive and intuitive senses indicated in the definition are the most relevant here.
6. “Spiritual Exercises”, 83.
7. *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 135.
8. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, III, 11.
9. *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 137
10. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, X, 11.

11. *The Logic of Sense*, 49. Or, more obscurely:  
*not being inferior to the event, becoming the child of one's own events (Dialogues, 65).*

12. On *phantasia* and *phantasma*, see *The Stoics Reader*, 12. As will become evident further on, there is also some question here of the madness/ordinariness of speaking to oneself, silently or aloud, and of a concomitant recognition of familiar and unfamiliar phrases, with their differends. I will take this up in a future essay.

13. *Escape From the Twentieth Century*, 16–17.

14. *Theory of the Four Movements*, 67.

15. Compare, in this light, the delirious foldout “Table of the Progress of Social Movement” spanning 80,000 years with the utterly practical propositions of the “Note to the Civilized Concerning the Coming Social Metamorphosis”.

16. See *Theory of the Four Movements*, 284. The anti-giraffe is one of the new animals of Harmony, *a great and magnificent servant whose qualities will far surpass the good qualities of the reindeer.*

17. "... Blue-bolo, Paleo-bolo, Dia-bolo, Punk-bolo, Krishna-bolo, Taro-bolo, Jesu-bolo, Tao-bolo, Marl-bolo, Necro-bolo, Pussy-bolo, Para-bolo, Basket-bolo, Coca-bolo, In-cap-a-bolo, HighTech-bolo, Indio-bolo, Alp-bolo, Mono-bolo, Metro-bolo, Acro-bolo, Soho-bolo, Proto-bolo, Herb-bolo, Macho-bolo, Hebro-bolo, Ara-bolo, Freak-bolo, Straight-bolo, Pyramido-bolo, Marx-bolo, Sol-bolo, Tara-bolo, Uto-bolo, Sparta-bolo, Bala-bolo, Gam-bolo, Tri-bolo, Logo-bolo, Mago-bolo, Anarcho-bolo, Eco-bolo, Dada-bolo, Digo-bolo, Subur-bolo, Bom-bolo, Hyper-bolo, Rock n'-bolo, etc. Moreover, there are also just good old regular bolos, where people live normal, reasonable and healthy lives (whatever those are)." (*bolo'bolo*, 80–1)

18. *The Ego and Its Own*, 88–89. I have already commented on this passage, with reference to related alimentary imagery in Nietzsche, in my "How the Stirner Eats Gods".

19. *The Ego and Its Own*, 220.

20. *The Ego and Its Own*, 262.

21. I am referring, of course, to the Epicurean *tetrapharmakon*, the briefest epitome of their philosophy.

22. *species being*, 22.

23. *ibid.*

24. *species being*, 48.

25. The *centripetal* social organization, that is, whose emergence Pierre Clastres tried to understand in the essays collected in *Society Against the State*.

26. *species being*, 51.

27. *species being*, 56.

28. *species being*, 114.

29. That someone can speak to a wall is already a marvelous and irreducible fact of a future anarchist anthropology! This magical speech, the natural converse of speaking to oneself, also belongs to a future essay.

30. “Definitions”, in Knabb, *SI Anthology*, 52. I might note here that the definition, in French, seems to be ambiguous as to whether it is the effects or the study of the effects that acts on our affective life. But the conjoined definition of *psychogeographical* makes clear

that it is a question of the *direct action* of the milieu on affectivity.

31. *Mutual Aid*, Chapters 7 & 8, *et passim*.

32. Perhaps then a more relevant reference is not science but science fiction. As Deleuze wrote of Hume's empiricism:

*As in science fiction, one has the impression of a fictive, foreign world, seen by other creatures, but also the presentiment that this world is already ours, and these creatures, ourselves ("Hume", 35).*

33. *Theory of the Four Movements*, 293.

34. *Theory of the Four Movements*, 299.

35. *Theory of the Four Movements*, 303.

36. *Theory of the Four Movements*, 33–4.

37. *The Land-Without-Evil*, 49–57.

38. *The Land-Without-Evil*, 56.

39. Would it be going too far to write that they perhaps felt the Earth anew?
40. "The Sceptic". In *Selected Essays*, 104.
41. It is no coincidence that some anarchists and communists have recently posed the problem of what they provocatively call *anti-politics*.
42. "The Sceptic", 105.
43. "The Sceptic", 113. Perhaps amusement is the only thing worth hoping for.



**THAT TEACHING IS IMPOSSIBLE**

*An essay reflecting on some experiences as a teacher, composed at the request of Rob Haworth. Though its setting is the university, I believe it is relevant to other instances of teaching—and attempted teaching. I appreciate its insistence on learning what was to be learned from the practices I was most often engaged in at the time, and its interruption of the easy importing of pedestrian lessons from anarchism to the academy, or vice versa. It was published in Rob's Anarchist Pedagogies (PM, 2012), where it is accompanied by three dialogues that engaged the pieces in the rest of the collection.*

That *teaching is impossible* is not a proposition to be argued for. It would be of little interest to offer it up for debate. It would be useless to defend it against the evidence of history or common sense. To consider that teaching is impossible is to open ourselves up to an experience of the most outlandish sort. In staging this experience I wish to contemplate the happy frustration of the urge to teach, and to affirmatively invoke the limits of all pedagogies.

It is useful for anyone who thinks that they teach to explore their urge to do so. This urge is an intimate matter, the libidinal support for the innocent claim that good ideas ought to be passed on to others. I call the claim innocent in that it usually leaves the good of ideas (and the Idea of the Good) implicit and unexamined; since the good remains unexamined, people may obtusely invoke their mere participation in efficient schooling as evidence that teaching is possible. That the school, as institution, survives; that the role of teacher is understood primarily in reference to the survival of the institution: these seem to be the only evidences necessary. But one can at least begin to account for and explore the complex of desires that aim at the role of teacher. Some of them wear the mask of the ego: *I am the one who impresses the lessons.*

Beyond the ego-mask, moving, that is, from what appears as inner to what appears as outer, one may observe the in-

evitable calcification of the urge to teach into the kinds of systems we call pedagogies. These may be described as organizations, not just of knowledge and methods of passing it on, but primarily of desire. They are institutional manifestations of the urge to teach, or rather, they are the ways in which the urge to teach, combined with other urges, invents for itself a gregarious existence, a school: *This is where the lessons are impressed.* In this sense, pedagogies may also be characterized as the fantasy of the efficacy of the urge to teach.

To say or think that teaching is impossible is to let go, however temporarily, of both the urge to teach and its more or less precisely formed collusions with other urges in gregarious forms, affirming rather that study is interminable, and so learning is endlessly frustrated and frustrating. To say or think that teaching is impossible is to assert that teaching on purpose, for a purpose, is impossible. For the urge in its gregarious form has other purposes, which concern the person of the teacher, his role, her specialization, in the context of the school; it has nothing in particular to do with learning. I am inclined to think that neither do schools. What anyone who thinks they are a teacher can do purposely is mainly of two natures:

- One can transmit data, information. This is better known as communication. It is commonly assimilated to teaching, but, as students well know, really has nothing to do

with it. This transmission is eminently possible and does not require a teacher.

- One can model behaviors and practices, silently offering them up for imitation. This is not only possible, but inevitable. But to whatever extent we do it for a purpose, it is for one other than to teach them. In this modeling we exceed the role of the teacher.

Pedagogy, then, is precisely the in-between of the ego-mask and the school, their mutual insertion, the becoming-method or becoming-gregarious of an urge in a fantasy: *This how the lessons are impressed*. In this sense to say or think that teaching is impossible is also to invoke the countless ways that learning takes place despite and beyond pedagogy. This is the beginning of the antipedagogical lesson. Let us consider it.

## 2

Sometimes, I think that I teach. When I do so I imagine I am not alone in underlining the evident gap between discussing practices and engaging in them. Classrooms have this virtue, that in them almost anything may be said; but to the degree that the desires that allow us to survive in such spaces remain unexamined, we will tend to confuse the ability to say

almost anything with the ability to do almost anything. This gap in capacity is especially manifest for me in the context of philosophy or anthropology, in courses that take up topics such as spiritual exercises, mysticism, shamanism, or the many practices that P. Hadot calls *philosophy as a way of life*. I mean any topic where what is posited is not merely thinking differently in the context of a given way of life, but a thinking that (because it is not just a thinking) requires a conversion. Becoming someone or something else, living differently, in short. One can certainly talk about such matters endlessly, treating them as historical or sociological facts, without grasping what is vital in them—without, that is, being transformed in the doing.

The minimum form of the affirmation *that teaching is impossible* would then be that with regard to practices that require a conversion, at least, teaching is impossible. I found in myself, not just an urge to teach, to be the teacher, but to teach these topics, and the urge was frustrated. The role of teacher became, if not impossible, at least somewhat laughable. The reason was clear enough. No one can teach such practices in a school unless it is the school of such practices: Epicureanism needs the Garden... Thinking I taught, I communicated information concerning these practices, but at a great remove; I did not model them. Moreover, some of them seem separate from any known pedagogy: mystics don't seem to me to have a school, but rather to be those who are usually

expelled from schools. This not because schools are dogmatic or authoritarian (though of course most are), but because of the sort of experience that mysticism seems to entail. (Or maybe not. One might go so far as to consider the maximum form of the claim, that the problem has to do with practice as such, with any practice other than those peculiar to schools as we know them.)

So what is left in such situations? The mere intention to teach what is impossible to teach, I suppose: the urge in its raw and complicated form, not its calcification into a pedagogy. We can try to collectively give in to the will to knowledge, to more than idle curiosity. That is, to what is in fact possible given the practices and ways of life that make schools as we know them possible. (As opposed to, and without in any way devaluing, those that destroy them, or mutate them until they are unrecognizable.) But I find that this will and that curiosity are unevenly distributed. You, teacher, must seduce your students into a certain fascination. That is what I call modeling, at least when modeling has a chance of success. It is akin to what psychoanalysts call the transference, or to hypnosis when it is grasped that what is at stake in it is something other than mind control, that the one hypnotized must at some level accept the process. It must involve your body, teacher, your gestures, movements, laughter: the mask, its generation, and its corruption. Those particulars can never be bypassed in the mimesis of the model.

But even if the will to knowledge or more than idle curiosity can be modeled and imitated, (and I do think that they can, on purpose and accidentally as well!) I do not think it is wise to claim that teaching has therefore happened, and is therefore possible. Something else is at stake. In modeling, the teacher's ego-mask is revealed in its development (from the urge to the role), but also in its happy failure: the failed transition from the urge through the role to its calcification as pedagogy and its sedimentation in schooling are all provisionally laid bare. In at least one important sense, the teacher is naked. What has been modeled and perhaps imitated is still quite separate from the topics in question, from the experiences at stake in them. What has been staged is rather an antipedagogical problem.

### 3

Can one pass on anything other than the will to knowledge and more than idle curiosity? What about less exotic practices, those that seem more at home in what we know as schools? For two years I was part of a university committee concerned with feminist studies. Once, in the course of a review of our work, we tried to define what constituted, for us, a specifically feminist pedagogy. The conversation was both frustrating and (at least for me) quite amusing. (*Giving*

*students a greater role in planning the curriculum, someone suggested. Allowing people to speak from their experience, another said. Encouraging connections between class readings and real-world issues, a third added. And so on.)* The more concepts and examples that we collectively proposed, the clearer it became that we could produce no difference between a specifically feminist pedagogy and good pedagogy in general. It seemed as if the problem was that we had it as our goal to stay away from the humdrum of the generic, unmarked good, and to cleave rather to a more rarefied good, the sharp edge of feminist politics. But in that humdrum, generic, unmarked mainstream, there are said to be good teachers, are there not? Is their pedagogy not good? Many, arguably most, of them are in no way feminists. Our true problem was not our desire to cling to the specificity of feminism—it was that we assumed that we were the ones who impressed its lesson, that our school was where the lesson was to be impressed, and that feminism, our method, our pedagogy, was to be how the lesson was to be impressed. We had supposed that teaching is possible.

Do these assumptions have anything to do with feminism as a way of life? If feminism can be learned, not as a set of theories or 'studies', but as an attitude, as something that can grow into a resistant politics, it is because some of us are capable of modeling it as it exists and develops in our lives. As such it has zero informational content, or its content is

incidental. That something like feminism exists at all suggests that it was, at some point, invented. At that time those who invented it were not producing new information (at least that was not what was remarkable in their invention). They were problematizing existing practices and the ways of life they flowed out of and into, proposing new ones. That something like feminism is still possible, still remarkable, suggests that someone can stage that problematization anew, in effect re-inventing feminism. What does any of this, however, have to do with schooling?

The committee's troubling, unstated conclusion was that we, presumably experts in feminism as *study*, could not guarantee that, in teaching classes with feminist content, we were teaching feminism. (A student could, for example, pass a course with flying colors and in some fundamental way remain oblivious to sexism. The same went for us as teachers of the course). Or, if we were teaching feminism, we could not define in what ways we were doing so in the context of feminist *studies*.

It ought to be clear by now that this version of the antipedagogical problem does not merely concern feminism. So, where to go from here? One familiar path is that of a certain *ressentiment*, leveraged in this case against the good teachers who do not mark the differences that we do, leveraged against students who do not become feminists or whose feminism is alien to us, leveraged ultimately against ourselves,

in our inevitable failure. This *ressentiment* is fed by the failure of an ideal of representation and inclusivity (its index: the presence of a certain sort of data, of information) to effect anything other than a reform in schooling—in the curriculum, I mean, in *studies*, defined according to the standards, the good, of what we know as schools.

Another path, which I admit I fell into as if by instinct, would be that of bemusement. It would be to simultaneously admit that teaching is impossible and that feminism, if it is a form of resistance and not just of study, will be reinvented quite despite those of us who, well-meaning, might think we are teaching it.

## 4

Let us consider, then, the lesson of resistance, turning from reformist to revolutionary pedagogies. Another university tale: I was once asked to speak at a symposium called “Achieving Success as a Latino”. I was asked by the organizers to address the difficulties Latinos and Latinas might encounter at a predominantly Anglo institution: obstacles, more generally, that all minorities face in the educational system. I said more or less the following: I don’t want to speak purely in praise of schooling, the overcoming of obstacles as progress, confusing the efficacy of schooling with the unqualified good of learn-

ing. I want to affirm learning in its entirety and as a process, with all of its conflicts and breakdowns, not to adopt a narrative of successes in the face of hardships. I regard phenomena such as Latinas dropping out of school, not going to college, feeling alienated in college, not just as problems to be solved institutionally, by schools or by groups in schools acting as their proxy. If we view all of these ‘problems’ as negativities, deficiencies, bad attitudes, we miss their complexity, what in them is positive, is desire. I think Latinos and everybody else have countless reasons and ways to engage with schools. I also think that Latinas (and everybody else!) have good reasons to resist some or all of what is institutionalized as education. Among other things, I am referring to what we know as schools: generally, spaces where training, discipline, authoritarianism, bureaucracy, are made more or less efficacious; spaces that are often culturally hostile or indifferent, etc.

A young Latino indeed ought to ask himself, *What is school to me? Why should I risk my life for this?*—of course *life* here is not the life taken away by the gun or torture, but the life of one’s barrio, community, friends, family—because many aspects of what it means to feel in one’s own skin, at home, or in a community are threatened in schools. That’s on the side of the construction of identity, a sense of self. On the side of the destruction of identity, the desire that so many of us have to overcome what we’ve been told we are—that process and its freedom are also threatened in that schooling has

always had to do with acculturation to a dominant culture, language, religion, etc. And also in the sense that schools neither teach nor favor rebellion. Institutionally this is discussed in terms of curriculum and catchphrases like *campus climate*, *diversity*, etc., but I think the real issue is one of power and gregarious desires: the school's explicit and implicit hierarchies and their insertion into greater social arrays. Let us consider those seen as problems or at least having problematic attitudes as resisting. I think that they are right to do so, at least as right as the schools in exercising power and modeling gregariousness. Some are more at home here than others. People inhabit, move through, move in and out of a school, at different speeds, for different reasons, in different moods, using different gaits. To regard resistance as a problem to be resolved by the school, or by us as its proxy, is to fully reinforce the role of the teacher in the school: *I am the one who solves this problem—I transform this problem into the good of the lesson.*

The critical question is: how are we using the school? What are we doing here if teaching is impossible? And this implies its converse: how is it using us? What is it doing with or to us (acknowledging that *it* is not a thing or subject, but the anonymous, gregarious actions of others)?

## 5

That talk ended with a proposal that I now recognize as well-intentioned (perhaps influenced by the good intentions of the symposium's planners) but poorly thought out. It was a gesture characteristic of a certain anarchism that claims for itself the side of the good, that proposes its revolutionary politics as the staging of the ultimate good.

I said: *So much for the side of the institution! Schooling doesn't—can't—end there.* Gregariousness certainly does not. It is part of being engaged with an institution, resistantly or not, that one tends to orient much of one's discourse and practices around the institution. (Supposing one wanted to define institutions, it might be worthwhile to begin by describing the various forms of this operation of capture.) It takes some distance (and dropping out, along with the other forms resistance takes, is a way to attain that distance) to be able to speak of schools as I have been doing, or of pedagogy as an outgrowth of the urge to teach. But really, there are schools everywhere. If I were to discuss the other possibilities for schooling I could of course talk about activism, popular education, etc., but I would rather race to the utopian end and propose that schools should have the ultimate goal of abolishing themselves as particular, separate, specialized spaces. My political proposal is that all of society be a school: that the social field be coeval with the space of learning. This means,

of course, that there would be a series of spaces, remarkable places of learning, rather than one megainstitution. It could come about through a collaboration between those happiest with schools as we know them, and those who resist or refuse schooling, relatively or absolutely.

My anti-political criticism of that political proposal is that making a plan for all of society (especially one with a grandiose slogan such as *abolish schools as separated spaces!*) without aiming at annihilating what we know as society is to give ourselves a Cause. The Cause of Making All of Society into A School. Now the mask is transformed. I am no longer in the role of teacher, but that of teacher-activist: *I am still the one who resolves this problem*—now putatively through revolution instead of reform. Schooling would be coeval with society in the worst sense, fostering in people not only the illusion that teaching is possible, but that freedom can be taught (anarchist pedagogy in its most nightmarish form). We would have set out with the best of intentions and ended up with the most grotesque gregariousness. It is true that study is interminable and that schools are everywhere; but schooling is not for all that omnipresent—it can and does end.

I would rather restate *that teaching is impossible* (and this time perhaps the modesty of the claim, so hard to see at first, begins to shine through). To focus our efforts, our analyses, on failure and resistance is to grasp the eccentric but vital role of modeling in the transmission of practices. It is inev-

itable that modeling will meet resistance. A model may be imitated, counterimitated, or met with sovereign indifference. We might cooperate, we might fight, or we might ignore each other. In that social chaos, in its interstices of order and stillness, someone might learn something. But nothing about this can be guaranteed. Why assume, why hope, even, that we will all collaborate? Why sculpt the mask in a way that arrogantly banks on success? It is the urge to teach, again reaching for the form of its survival. *I impress the lesson that schooling is interminable.*

## 6

I have already said that modeling is inevitable, and implied that it may be done more or less purposefully. This is difficult because we habitually vibrate in sync with others who share our models, and in this local phenomenon the entirety of our interactions is to effect tiny variants, microimitations and counterimitations, of each other's practices. The micro-politics of power; or, a day in school. But modeling is also impersonal and indefinite. Its tautological claim: *I am the one who lives as I live or even I am the one who expresses the model that I am modeling.*

The fullness of a self or a person is, as far as I am concerned, always and only an artifice, that of an apparently com-

pleted mask. The mask of the teacher, however, is incomplete. To think, to say, to embody *I am the one who impresses the lesson* is to simplify, to fool ourselves into identifying with our own mask, to frustrate the many other desires clamoring against the role, demanding, if you will, other masks. To seduce anyone else (to seduce oneself!) into fascination with a model is something else than to mistake oneself for the one who impresses the lessons. It is rather to display the urge, the mask, the frustrated tendencies to pedagogy and schooling, with all of their defects and failures—the failures of the simple mask of the teacher, the gregarious phenomenon of the school, and ultimately the failure of method, of all pedagogy. This impersonation shows what in the urge to teach is impersonal.

One way to conceive of this impersonality is the *silent teaching* R. Blyth reports on in his books on Zen.

*We teach silently and only silently, though we may be silent or talk.*

Silence: the offering up of the model for imitation, with no attendant command to imitate (or maybe with the most parodic of commands). Informationless speech, laughter, sighs... your body, again, teacher, in its becoming-mask. Everything else is a dance of data.

Irreparably, to live is to offer one's life up for imitation.

*People teach what they can. People teach what they teach.  
Everybody teaches everybody else.*

This is what I was getting at in deemphasizing the distinction between what can be passed on purposely and what is passed on inevitably. I am more interested in whether such things are done gracefully, as one may live one's life more or less gracefully. And perhaps the most graceful lesson is that teaching is impossible. But how is *that* to be passed on?

*The only way to teach not teaching is really not to teach.*

## 7

One final antipedagogical lesson, this one specifically for my friends, the anarchists. I hope it is clear that I have written from my own resistance. I like to think that, despite my several decades of study, I have resisted schooling. But my distance is double, since I observe that I maintain a willful incompetence when it comes to political movements that amounts to a form of resistance. There are, after all, schools everywhere! It is my style, my predilection, my *wu wei* regarding schooling, regarding the roles of academics and activists. I believe that everything I have proposed about the urge to teach, about schools, and about pedagogy applies *mutatis mutandis* to activism, organizing, movements. Try the experiment yourself: go to a rally or meeting looking for teaching. You will find it. Ah, the pedagogy of rallies and meetings!

Some activists and their theorist friends are busy looking to the primitive past or the utopian future for a humanity without social institutions, as though discovering their absence someplace, somewhere, could lead to their amelioration or eradication today. Now, the absence of a given institution, especially one that I find intolerable, such as money or the police, is indeed a fascinating question for study. But study is interminable; it only leads to more study. I prefer to add to study another practice, to model a kind of disappearance, an incompetence that is a way to absent oneself from routinized activities on the side of schools as well as the side of the movements. It is possible to live this as something other than a negation. And as in all modeling, what I can do is simply to offer up the urge to teach and the urge to act as some desires among many. We can try to (and I suppose that we should) eradicate whatever social institutions we find to be intolerable; but we can also do what we can, silently, to lay bare our desires as we discover them, our social teachings as they meet resistances that, after all, have their reasons. We can be naked, with a mask on. Naturally, to call oneself an anarchist is to wear a fanciful mask: *I am the one who...* But if anarchism is our perhaps inevitable pedagogy, anarchy could be something else: our antipedagogy.



## **READING *and* NOT READING**

*Experimental writing done in public places in the wake of one of the major waves of digital colonization of life. Composed 2008, incorporating older strata as old as 1999. First appeared as mufa::poema 08 (2009). The layout here duplicates the original's pagination.*

+ It is, first of all, a *habit*.

± And, for us, habit means: the survival of a practice.

± Looking up the city street, gentle surprise at the thickness of signs: so many letters, words, little symbols. And then, with some gratitude, looking down: some dirt on a wall, at least there a pause.

+ It is, second of all, a *pastime* accomplished with found materials.

+ A habit or pastime, then, that reads a face, a gesture, a posture; a scene, a place, a landscape.

+ On the Way to Habit:

In what follows we shall be *questioning* concerning habit. Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is a way of thinking. All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a way that is extraordinary. We shall be questioning concerning *habit*, and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it. The relationship will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of habit. When we can respond to this essence, we shall be able to experience the habitual within its own bounds.

- + It is a habit that can bring about, and overcome, the experience of boredom.
- + Nerves: you experience your day as winding up and so, sooner or later, unwind.

- + What is found: you and I in these Middle Ages. I mean doctrine. And logic.
- + The patient scholar wrote:

### THE LOGIC OF FABLES

*And the question is asked: style aside, what is one committed to when one suspects that there is a logic, any logic, to fables, or that every fable has one or more logics?*

*To which it is replied: in the first place, surely not that there is any point in reading a fable according to the hypothesis of the possible recovery of the intended meaning of an author. That is all imaginary. Surely not that there is any singular path through the fable, which can then be used to explain away any exceptions or contradictions to its particular trajectory. That is all, though in a different mode, imaginary as well.*

*In the second place, when one uses the expression *logic* in this sense one means nothing more than the fable's survival as a written residue of utterance; one is referring to the contingency of every utterance, as embodied or manifested in writing.*

*And the question is asked:* can one know with certainty when one has found out the logic or logics of a fable?

*To which it is replied:* in the first place, it does seem that certain readings can be explained by reference to a logic that one perceives only incompletely. For the fable's survival, its conditions, are hardly transparent: they bear all the complicated, confused traces of its history, of its writing, duplication, reception, translation, and interpretation.

*Scholium.* One should insist that reading a fable based on some approach to its logic is something other than an interpretation. The difference is that interpretations, based on hermeneutical understandings, try to grasp how a fable conveys meaning at one or more levels. Another approach is to investigate the distribution, in the fable, of lines of force enveloped in coded indices and subsequently mapped grammatically and syntactically across the page.

*It is concluded, then, that* the survival of the fable can and should be alluded to in any reference to its logic, without the presumption that some interpretative coherence has thus been established.

[Scholiast: What then *has* been established?]

- + Survival has something to do with the compulsion to speak.
- + You are chatty and everything we do presupposes writing, inscription. Now, a tattoo: for you, you who are already tattooed.

#### CHATTER AND NOT CHATTER (PSEUDOANTINOMIES)

- + It is fair to assume that most people here want to talk. But it is also fair to assume that, most of the time, they can't help talking.
- ± Their speech then is most of the time automatic, or compulsive.
- ± But even if this is, generally, true enough, its veracity is also unevenly distributed. It is only so useful to think so in relation to any given speech act.
- + It is therefore fair to assume that there is no point paying too much attention to what people here talk about. But it is also fair to assume, therefore, that if people here talk because they want to, listening closely will turn up more or less everything you need to know.

- ± That is, listening closely, the attention, if it is a gift, is a desirous one, a gift of organs (the ear, the gaze, a gesture that acknowledges). If attention is insisted upon, demanded unkindly, this is a minor or major violence (encroachment on an exposed organ, the ear especially).
- ± These are, of course, utterly fictional poles. They are fables in which the moral reveals pure events of freedom and slavery, desire and power.
- + It is therefore fair to assume that how people talk here has something to do with their double compulsion: to send more or less anonymous messages into the Great Web, and to carry personal telephones that tend to multiply their opportunities for chatter. But it is also fair to assume, therefore, that what they do there is an extension of what they do here, and so there is nothing to conclude from such proclivities about telephony, or about the Great Web.

- + Consider, then, what this warm breeze would be should the exogamous promise take over in our tightly wound kinship networks. I mean the fable of how we are woven and unwound in each others' lives. And the moral that tells of how we do and do not want to be.
- + Consider it. For astrally we are never together, and that, naturally, is an image of health.
- + Consider it in this sense: we are not the same so conversations can unfold.
  - ± A stray smile or glance (requiring the interpretation of a third) passes through the breeze, yes. Yes to the smile or glance that usually opens onto a great void.
  - ± The Great Web *is* the great void.
- + (Explosive laughter)

- + We are so foreign to each other and yet so familiar in our habit.
- + Refinement of the habit is to disengage it from informational flows. I do not want to be informed, rather to inform. Sometimes deform. At least to discover or invent a gap in which to witness how a form gives itself, is given. Then whatever, I am receptive, after all.

± Habit is the gap, to cultivate it.

± The bored and the unwound: potential readers.

- + I mean doctrine, a teaching, something didactic. Read the fable. Don't read the moral.
- ± Someone died unexpectedly. The announcement was written. And someone else said not to read it. "There can be no style there." But my habit is just to be in search of style.
- ± Style: it was written, anyway. After all, should I have taken his death, the accident, to be information?
- + On the other side I place, not *not* reading the moral, but re-reading it. After all. The first reading (imagine a discrete act) just shows this: oh, it's a moral. Then re-read, knowing it is supposed to be a moral.
- ± Supposed: sub-posed. But the reading refuses sub-position, the placing-under that refuses reading. The moral that botches the fable. Rather let the habit do its work until what is there to read shows itself as position, as taking place.

- + One imagines that the name of the habit, *reading*, is losing consistency, changing reference. Gradually it becomes synonymous with what were once more specific terms, such as skimming or scanning.
- + TXT or instrumental abbreviation.
  - ± One feels a moment of despair in this reverie but rapidly enough the habit shows its own consistency.
  - ± It is not weak. It has strange resources. It becomes in this sorry moment a kind of magic. Bruno said so.
- ± *This sorry moment*. That is reading, already.

- + What is not a pastime, which is to have an order, to accept an ordering, one's own or not, is still a pastime. One could even say that it is an entertainment—but only in the most literal sense.
- + I invoke distinctions. I learned their art in my habit. Thus making and unmaking them becomes part of the habit: an appendix.
- + Refinement of the habit is in ordering to inform.  
Informing information or to give the fable (not merely its supposed moral) a form.
- ± There where form emerges: the habit.

WANDERING OFF *from*  
*WILLFUL DISOBEDIENCE*

(THREE REMARKS *and an IMAGINARY TITLE*)

*An essay in search of an oblique angle from which to respond to a then recently published collection of writings by Wolfi Landstreicher—and generally to contribute to the energy and ideas around the Ardent Press project. It seemed to me that by the time Willful Disobedience was published, everyone, whether for or against, was treating Wolfi's writings as a known quantity; my task was to do the opposite, to make them unfamiliar. The essay first appeared in The Anvil Review 3 in 2011. I append an exchange with Alex Gorrion, one of the other regular contributors to The Anvil, as it unfolded over more than a year's time on the Great Web, as further documentation of the way dialogue did, and did not, unfold around The Anvil.*

*... outside everything else and inside myself...*

— Plotinus *Enneads* IV, 8, 1

I have some comments about a compilation of short writings entitled *Willful Disobedience*. It may be an odd experience to read through the book cover to cover as I did. Written over the course of a decade, the pieces in it quietly overlap and repeat each other in form and content. One does not gain much through a linear reading of this collection. But that is how I read it. And so much about this book is strange to me in a way I can barely express! I prefer to say very little about its combination of precision and vagueness, its compact historical narratives and impossibly hostile denunciations of the present. My impression is that of being before a synthesis of incisive challenges and almost dreamlike stories offered as explanations: unusual gifts of an unusual understanding. As far as I am concerned all of this is a wonderful sort of prose poetry for what are admittedly restricted tastes.

What follows is hopefully too bizarre to be mistaken for a critical review. It consists of three interlinked remarks. They are the results of my attempt to orient myself in this mixed writing while wandering progressively farther off in the direction of an imaginary title.

*From the Will to Nonvoluntary Action*

My first remark concerns the role of the will in *Willful Disobedience*. In the last selection, Wolfi Landstreicher presents in its most complete form a case for revolution that he calls

*the revolutionary wager.*

I will cite two lengthy passages:

Both hope in a collapse and despair in the face of the present catastrophic reality involve looking at the present world on its terms, not on our own. Those who hold to either perspective have already assumed their own incapacity to act effectively in the world to realize their own desires and dreams. They, therefore, look at the realities of the world not as challenges to be faced and overcome, but as inevitabilities that must be endured. What is missing is the reversal of perspective referred to by Vaneigem, the individual insurrection that is the first step toward social insurrection. To take this step, it is necessary to have the courage to wager on ourselves and our ability to act, on our own when necessary, and together with others whenever possible.<sup>1</sup>

[...]

The world as it is today can seem overwhelming. The idea that revolution is “unrealistic” is not an illogical conclusion, but regardless of the

fierceness of the rhetoric of those who assume this, it indicates a surrender to the present reality. No matter how we choose to encounter the world, we are taking a gamble. There are no certainties, and for me this is part of the joy of life. It means that I can make choices on how I will act and that I can base those choices on my own desires. I desire a world in which the relationships between people are determined by those involved in terms of their needs, desires and aspirations. I desire a world in which every system of domination, every form of exploitation, all forms of rule and submission have ceased to exist. If I lay my wager against revolution, I am bound to lose. If instead I stake my life on immediately rebelling against the ruling order with the aim of social insurrection and revolutionary transformation, there is a possibility that I may win in the long run, and in the short run I will definitely win, because I will have made so much of my life my own against the ruling order that I will have actually lived, vibrantly in rage and joy. (303–304)

I repeat:

*No matter how we choose to encounter the world  
I can make choices.*

Now I underline: *choose, choices*. It seems that the background of choice is an experience of *encountering the world* that, in its uncertainty, seems to hold open for me the possibility of choosing now this, now that path. Here I would like to introduce a cleavage between choice and the experience of

encountering the world. In the schema of the wager, we can choose how we encounter the world; but can we choose *whether* to encounter the world? On the one side is choice, whatever that is. On the other is the apparent inescapability of a relation to the world. For me these are both striking. The wager emphasizes only the first.

I will illustrate my perplexity about the second with an example taken from elsewhere in the book. In a piece called "Resisting Representation," Landstreicher advocates *refusing to make ourselves into an image* (137).

The idea there is to stop focusing on how we are represented, especially by agents of a hostile media; to reject their advances and not to plan what we do or say around our anticipated representation by them. I tend to agree. But the greater issue for me is about the inevitability of images. Landstreicher writes in this piece as if any of us could halt the production of images, mediatic or otherwise. It seems to me, however, that the production of images ultimately has nothing to do with the media. If one posits a world, there must be images in it. Re-presentation re-produces images—images produced, presumably, in an initial, primary presentation. The bodies that compose the world radiate images, shed them, merely by being in it. Images are produced automatically just as shadows are cast. What we see in them, or their copies, is another matter. I do think the attitude one takes towards the production and reproduction of images matters, but I do not think I can

simply refuse it. How does a critique of spectacular images account for these ordinary ones? How does choice account for the givenness of the world?

For Landstreicher, what in me refuses or, more generally, chooses, is the will, a venerable philosophical and political concept. The term and the idea are everywhere in his book. I imagine that, for him, this emphasis on the will is the natural correlate of a focus on the individual. The will, as the faculty of affirming or denying, is indeed traditionally parceled out to individual bodies, souls, or selves. But my question is beyond individualism. One can conceive of individuality with or without the will. One can also experience many forms of group belonging and feel that certain groups do or do not have a collective will. But perhaps the greatest problem with assuming the will as a distinct faculty of the individual is that it divides out in me what chooses from what does not. What does the rest of me do? Follow? (Another, perhaps more obscure, form of this question would be: do I encounter myself in the world? If part of me does not revolt, is it really me, or is it another aspect of the world that the rest of me, presumably the true self, confronts? Aren't all of these unanswerable questions the result of a leftover idea of the self as a thing, a substance?)

Reading "The Revolutionary Wager," two questions impressed themselves upon me: what if I have no experience of

choice, of the will as a separate faculty in me? What if I merely remain skeptical of such an account?

Entertaining these questions (right now I am not interested in distinguishing between them), we could draw up a more complete picture, wandering off from the strict terms of the wager as proposed by Landstreicher. There have to be at least two other options.

— I could find that I do not revolt. But instead of framing that discovery within the wager (as automatically losing!), where not rebelling is seen as a choice, I could explore further and determine that, here and now, I cannot revolt. Whatever I am, however I am composed, it is not up to me. If I remain within the wager, my determination shows me as pathetic, cowardly. Wandering off from the wager, a new option makes me curious to myself. This is the realm of the involuntary.

— I could find that I do revolt. But, in so doing, I realize that my revolt is not the result of a choice I have made. I discover that I am already revolting. This is the realm of the nonvoluntary. Retroactively, I could say I willed it, but why re-enter into that terrain of explanation when the discovery of nonvoluntary rebellion is so interesting?

What is called a choice seems to me to be a minute inclination wrapped up or entangled in a vast network of other, more ob-

scure, less well understood, inclinations. It is something like an unexpected and unpredictable tipping point wherein inclinations get arranged in a certain pattern. I understand such inclinations and arrangements, in their multiplicity, fairly well; I do not understand the place of a supposed faculty of the will among them. Every tipping point is different, because it involves different inclinations. There is no reason other than a moral or aesthetic one to crown a series of actions and events in this manner. There are other ways to tell this story. Most importantly, at any given moment I may be composed of contradictory tendencies, patterns of inclinations arranged in divergent tendencies—at the limit, contradictory tendencies in open combat. What I call nonvoluntary actions are the expressions of such impure and complex processes. In sum, the two new options I propose frame the will, the supposed faculty of choice, as something more artificial, more dependent on naming and narrative, private and public, than the two options offered to me in the revolutionary wager.

To ignore the insistence of my questions and forge ahead, assuming the reality of choice and the will, seems like something one does or ought to do if one has already decided one has a will (and presumably that everybody else does as well). But it seems to me that I can make no such decision except in passing, at exceptional moments. In such moments I might say that there is voluntary action. But there are other moments, far more common: the rest of the time, I would say

there is involuntary and nonvoluntary action. From these last two perspectives, I suggest instead that one can feel one is already rebelling, revolting, resisting (or not!), without any clear sense of why. Rather than a wager that explains revolt in terms of the will (or some kind of argument that justifies it in terms of reason) I invoke these odd impressions: *I cannot revolt* (involuntary); *I am revolting* (nonvoluntary). (The dualism is simplistic and awkward, of course. I employ it in the interest of complicating the either/or of the revolutionary wager.) In these cases I do not know or cannot justify the action of the inclination that tips a multiplicity of inclinations in this or that direction, let alone multiple simultaneous directions.

The multiplicity of the self is one issue. Value is another. Landstreicher suggests that his wager in favor of revolt is desirable because, opting for revolt, no matter, what, I win. If I deny the choice in favor of revolt, I lose. I am profoundly unconvinced by the valuation implied in these terms, and especially in their opposition. It is odd to say this, but there are many people I know, some of whom I collaborate with, whose victory I dread. And as for those who have lost or are losing, there is much to be learned in their failures. I would even go so far as to say that the idea of my own victory, especially when I am with others, is somewhat repugnant.

Asking *am I nonvoluntarily revolting?* ought to generate a great variety of answers. It is a far more rich terrain than

what is revealed in the flat yes or no of the wager. It is only in the rarest case that I will conclude that I am not, in any way, revolting. (But this insight requires an attention to micropolitics that is, to say the least, scarce.) And if we accept the multiplicity in what we call individuals, we can also broaden our thinking to include the almost irreducible complexities of aggregations of people: groups, clans, tribes ... societies. Now, Landstreicher numbers himself among those

*who reject this society in its totality.*<sup>2</sup>

But what he repeatedly calls *this society* is far less unified, far more unstable than he conceives it to be. It is not any one thing! To call a society or a civilization a *totality* as he does is to engage in abstraction. To imagine a society or civilization as a great organism or mega-individual presents the same problems as the analogous insistence on a certain kind of personal individuality (they are the results of the same habits of thought). It is one of the fancies of the true individualist, of the mask called the ego: me and the world, me-and-then-the-world, offered as the desirable reversal of everyone else's the-world-and-then-me. I *encounter* the world, he writes; I do not cease to find such formulations strange. I have only had such experiences (of the unification of society or world into a totality, of facing my life or the world, of the distance implied in such... metaphors) in moments of the greatest intellectual abstraction.

That is all I have to say about the idea of choice as a pure event, really: when somebody reports on having chosen this or that separate from (in a position of transcendence with regard to) a vast network of other dispositions, I usually suppose he or she is somewhat deluded. But when someone like Landstreicher reports on an absolute and sovereign *encounter with the world*, this claim seems to emerge from a very private, quite incommunicable experience (it is much more difficult to identify a transcendent element in it). In neither case can I say I share this experience; but Landstreicher's version is clearly the more interesting one for me.

### *A Logic of Faith*

A second remark begins with the discovery of a silent allusion, that, in my curiosity, I will explore, wandering off in a different direction. The text of the revolutionary wager, in its title, in its logic, and in its insistence, echoes Pascal's famous text on the wager, which concerns, at least on the face of it, belief in God.

God is, or is not. But towards which side will we lean? Reason cannot decide anything. There is an infinite chaos separating us. At the far end of this infinite distance a game is being played and the coin will come down heads or tails. How will you wager?

Reason cannot make you choose one or the other, reason cannot make you defend either of the two choices.

So do not accuse those who have made a choice of being wrong, for you know nothing about it! 'No, but I will blame them not for having made this choice, but for having made any choice. For, though the one who chooses heads and the other one are equally wrong, they are both wrong. The right thing is not to wager at all.'

Yes, but you have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed.<sup>3</sup>

Because we are already committed, Pascal argues, it follows that we should choose to believe in God. If we do so and are wrong, nothing happens. If we believe and are right, we can look forward to eternity in heaven. But if we do not believe and are wrong, we will suffer for eternity, while if we do not believe and are right nothing happens. This, in addition to the presumption that the first 'nothing happens' is a happier life than the second, tips the scales for Pascal in favor of faith. The wager is stated in absolute terms: I can choose to believe, and accept every consequence of so choosing, or not. Choosing to believe seems to be a sovereign act of will, an irreversible event. Belief is the will's flourishing: *one must believe something!* as the consequence of the implicit *you have a will*. But the wager is less about the will as such, and more

an argument for the inevitability of faith. This makes sense if we consider an anti-Pascalian response: *I believe nothing!*, or at least *I suspend judgment* as the correlates of *there is no will* or *I doubt that there is a will*. Pascal includes the second in his text as an impossible position (elsewhere he calls it Pyrrhonism, because he knows the skeptics are his enemies).

In any case, the wager presupposes the will and conceives belief or faith as its proper deployment. So the question for me is about the strange connections we might make between the will, faith and anarchy. David Graeber refers to faith in an exposition with some instructive parallels to the revolutionary wager. Here he is in the course of enumerating some liberatory principles:

... institutions like the state, capitalism, racism and male dominance are not inevitable; ... it would be possible to have a world in which these things would not exist, and ... we'd all be better off as a result. To commit oneself to such a principle is almost an act of faith, since how can one have certain knowledge of such matters? It might possibly turn out that such a world is not possible. But one could also make the argument that it's this very unavailability of absolute knowledge which makes a commitment to optimism a moral imperative: Since one cannot know a radically better world is not possible, are we not betraying everyone by insisting on continuing to justify, and

reproduce, the mess we have today? And anyway, even if we're wrong, we might well get a lot closer.<sup>4</sup>

This version of the wager is much more pragmatic; and not surprisingly, Graeber's use of the term *faith* is more nominalistic (*almost*). They are tempered, I suppose, by the sociological and anthropological traditions he draws on. In this schema, one could partially succeed. Graeber probably thinks of faith as emergent from the *socius*, as an attitude made available by groups through and in their practices, variable as practices are variable, stable as they are stable, etc. Accordingly, he not only proposes we commit, but that we commit to optimism. (It would seem that optimism is the correlate of partial victory.)

Contrast this with another passage by Landstreicher on the wager:

Revolution is a wager, and that wager is precisely that the unknown, which offers the possibility of the end of domination and exploitation, is worth risking, and that taking this risk involves the destruction of the totality of this civilization of domination and exploitation—including its technological systems—that has been all we have ever known. Life is elsewhere. Do we have the courage and the will to find it? (251, from “On the Mystical Basis of the ‘Neutrality’ of Technology”)

The differences should be obvious. This version of the wager is clearly more absolute: the use of the terms *totality* and *will* is its marker. We are not to commit to optimism; the idea

is rather that of a pure commitment corresponding to the all or nothing terms of the wager. It is this absoluteness of Landstreicher's version of the wager that brings it so close to Pascal's. They both set aside reasonable arguments (for the existence of god, for revolt) and speak to the will. Pascal:

*you must wager.*

And in so doing, they tell the rest of us, those unimpressed with such a necessity, that we are in fact creatures with a will, *already committed*. Pascal:

*how will you wager?*

Let us learn to see the gradations between Graeber's version of the wager and Landstreicher's. Let us remain open to the possibility of a qualitative difference between them. One could, of course, describe that difference in more detail as a cultural difference, a difference between practices and ways of life, as well as understandings of the world—which they are both, each in his own way, interested in. For example, Landstreicher contrasts his position with what he calls *moderation*, an

*acceptance of what is* (123);

not to accept is, for him, acting *forcefully* (223). This all follows: once I suppose I have a will, force seems to be its highest expression, its optimal deployment. From there, it is not far to describe *one's life as a weapon*.

Something about the absolute character of Pascal's wager, its way of framing the world *on his own terms*, is relevant to

understanding Landstreicher's complete rejection of *what is*.  
They name the world, society,  
*infinite distance,*  
*infinite chaos,*

so as to destroy it, attack it, leap over it. Very well. But I still can't say that I have filled out this picture, or answered my own questions about will and world.

Was Pascal, is Landstreicher, doing anything more than reporting on their own experience? If so, what is communicative in their statements? For my part, I do not think that Pascal refuted religious skeptics. What he did do successfully is write out a logic of faith, attempting to communicate the inner experience of the faithful. But is a wager the true or ultimate logic of faith? Or is it a mask for it to wear before a hostile public? I leave that question to the faithful, just as I leave Landstreicher's wager to those who feel it speaks to them.

Consider the following notes written by Paul Valéry in a notebook of 1936:

*Pascal is the type of the anarchist and that is what I find best in him.*

*"Anarchist" is the observer who sees what he sees and not what he is supposed to see.  
He reasons upon it.<sup>5</sup>*

(Note the parallel with Landstreicher's insistence on encountering the world on our own terms.) Of course Valéry is only partly right. However provocative it is to register Pascal as *the*

type of the anarchist, it is obvious to me that there is more than one type. The interest of these lines is not in the clarification of who or what is an anarchist, but rather in the making impure of the category of the anarchist by suggesting its type could be someone like Pascal. This making impure challenges us to think differently—about the status of the revolutionary wager, for example.

More impurity: Pascal should not be reduced to his wager (there are, for example, those delightful pages on boredom in the *Pensées*...). Nor Landstreicher to his. Seeking to reject moderation and to act forcefully *in writing*, though, he had to invent something like the revolutionary wager. But if I think this, I can no longer take the wager on its own terms. It registers rather as an excessive attempt to communicate something that is very difficult to say.

### *The Discovery of Mysticism*

Wandering one step farther out, a few more lines from the same page in Valéry:

*Every mystic is a vessel of anarchy.  
Before God considered in the secret of oneself, and as  
one's secret, everything else is powerless.  
All power is contemptible.<sup>6</sup>*

Thanks to my detour through Pascal and Valéry, I have found a way of understanding Landstreicher. It is to say that he speaks mystically. I can understand calling society or civilization a *totality* as something other than a grotesque abstraction if I treat it as a mystical utterance. Maybe for those of us that remain skeptical, or speak from another perspective, this is the most generous approach. I also think, however, that mystics are precisely those who succeed by failing (to communicate). It is no coincidence that the preferred form of expression of the greatest among them is the paradox. What characterizes mystics is their propensity to use every word, especially *God*, in a way that is paradoxical. What happens when we apply an analogous interpretation to certain anarchist uses of terms such as *society*, *civilization*, or *technology*? I will try to push Landstreicher in this direction, in part because his writing implies it, in part because I suppose he would reject it.

I say that he would reject it because of the way he uses the word. In a piece on Marxist determinist approaches to technology and progress, he contrasts a *truly historical approach to social struggle* (249) with a mystical one—and classes the determinist one as mystical! This is just name-calling. Mysticism is an experience, not a kind of theory. *The idea of history as human activity* (249) can just as well be a mystical idea as it can be a materialist (or whatever is proffered as the non-mystical position) one. It ought to be clear that I do not

use the term *mystic* as an epithet of any sort—though in this context it is, of course, a provocation.

Landstreicher makes a Pascalian case; he uses Pascalian logic. But I doubt he is asking us to have faith in anything. I prefer to say that he is reporting on an experience (of society or civilization as a totality, for example) that I think of as mystical, and that this experience finds its paradoxical expression in a retooling of Pascal's wager. But the paradox does not lie in an overt logical contradiction in the terms of the revolutionary wager. It is in the gap between the wager itself and what it might be imagined to express: inclinations that exceed its terms.

One curious piece entitled “Religion: When the Sacred Imprisons the Marvelous” could be interpreted along these lines. It begins by invoking an “encounter with the world” that Landstreicher calls

*an experience of the marvelous. (198)*

The thrust of the piece is to stridently contrast the sense of the marvelous in individual experience with every form of religion. Here Landstreicher joins those who claim that religion works through separation. Consecration, making things sacred, is its operation, and this expropriation of the experience of the marvelous is theorized in strict analogy with political or economic expropriations. The sacred is of a piece with private property and the state; its agents are specialists of the holy: shamans or priests. Landstreicher concludes:

If we are to again be able to grasp the marvelous as our own, to experience wonder and joy directly on our own terms, to make love with oceans or dance with stars with no gods or priests intervening to tell us what it must mean, or, to put it more simply, if we are to grasp our lives as our own, creating them as we will, then we must attack the sacred in all its forms. We must desecrate the sacredness of property and authority, of ideologies and institutions, of all the gods, temples and fetishes whatever their basis. Only in this way can we experience all of the inner and outer worlds as our own, on the basis of the only equality that can interest us, the equal recognition of what is wonderful in the singularity of each one of us. (204)

*To grasp our lives as our own* is equated here with *grasping the marvelous as our own*. Here we have the now-familiar *encounter with the world... on our own terms* of the wager described in a manner that, for me, cannot remain separated from the claims of mystics.

I will try to imagine myself into this experience. Here is the world; it should be mine, without mediation. Every custom and institution is an obstacle between me and the world. I discover in myself a set of inclinations that act to remove these obstacles; they come in a bundle; I call this bundle the will. The relative totalization, becoming-bundle, of inclinations, seems to me to be identical to the emergence of the experience of the will. End imagination.

Now, I would not say that the becoming-bundle of certain inclinations is identical to the will. That is only one way to tell this story. But the feeling of a forceful pattern—that the inclinations are forceful, or seem to get arranged forcefully—in a single direction is my way of accounting for the will as an occasional emergent phenomenon. This emergence is obscure for most. Naturally, those who become aware of, and report on, such processes speak obscurely. Dwelling in all of this obscurity matters, as it could be that the relative totalization of the bundle (it acts as one, it is forceful) is how the experience of society or civilization as a totality is able to occur at all. Once I feel that I can *totalize* part of my experience, creating for myself a faculty of will, I will likely see this effort mirrored in the environment, but now absolutely, as the world. Or as: all of the inner and outer worlds ...

William James offers two key defining traits of mysticism in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The first is *ineffability*: something in mystical experience defies expression. Landstreicher does not claim this of the wager or of his encounter with the world, but the experience of the marvelous *on own terms* must have something ineffable in its immediacy. So there is a gap between this ineffability and the text of the wager. The second trait is a *noetic quality*: mystical states are productive of knowledge. There is insight there, important yet difficult to articulate. When something is difficult to ar-

ticulate, especially if it has to do with an experience of the All, it is common to state it in all or nothing terms.

In the second fragment on the wager cited above (*The world as it is today...*), Landstreicher mentions *immediately rebelling*. From the point of view of choice this probably means rebelling *right away*, but the context also suggests rebelling *without mediation*. This slippage between references to temporal urgency and to reality is also visible in the description of victory in the same fragment: *I will have actually lived*. Here the order of priority is reversed, since *actually* probably means *with a superior grasp on reality*, whereas the context also suggests doing it *now*.

This refusal of mediated, second-hand experience (the world *on its terms*) is done in the name of immediate, first-hand experience (the world *on our terms*). The mystical Now is the immediate real. Well, all of this is precisely what we need to pragmatically define those who speak as mystics. They are not in a role, nor are they specialists; their experiences are singular to them, untranslatable. Landstreicher rejects what he calls

*becoming passive slaves or dissolving ourselves in the  
alleged oneness of Nature*

in favor of

*becoming uncontrollable individuals... (214, from  
"Afterword: Destroy Civilization?"')*

This does not tell us he cannot be heard as a mystic, but it does tell us what kind of mystic he might be heard as. *Who* is the uncontrollable individual? One who senses something in her that can remove every obstacle between her and the marvelous.

For my part, I do not deny the experience of the marvelous. Quite to the contrary! I have it all the time. But it would occur to me only rarely, if at all, to couple it with some kind of sovereign choice or act of will. That coupling suggests to me, in James' terms, an ineffable experience with a noetic component. That is what makes me—generously!—want to say that Landstreicher speaks as a mystic.

Rather than attempting to destroy the totality, the obviously desirable choice in the revolutionary wager, I prefer to begin by asking how it is that someone could come to see society or civilization as one! I could also ask whether it makes sense to describe the irreducible manyness of impressions and sensations as a world. In so asking I am also able to explore what in me does not share in such a vision. This does not divide me from the voice that speaks in the name of willful disobedience: it brings me (pervertedly, I admit) one step closer to a conversation.

Such a conversation could take up impurity. I do not really think Landstreicher is a mystic. But it does seem to me that instead of accepting the terms of his wager, I can show

myself as incompetent in matters of choice, and busy myself with studying what is impure in his statements as well as my person.

I could say: *very well, you have spoken. Your utterances are so strange, but also so interesting, that I am tempted to call some of them mystical. This is not an epithet; it is the mark of my interest and also of my distance. When I compare you to Pascal, I see in you the anarchist Valéry saw in him. When I say you speak as a mystic, I am recognizing that you are a vessel of anarchy.*

### *The Idea of Willful Incompetence*

I am tempted to write something in the future to share my perspective on these matters. I might call it: *Willful Incompetence*.

It could begin from the experience of those who, some or all of the time, do not think they can deploy their will in the manner I have been interrogating; those who do not, or very rarely do, find themselves opting for failure or victory.

It could discuss incompetence (willful!) at making metaphysical determinations.

Here is an inappropriate question: what is the genre of the pieces in *Willful Disobedience*? Are they articles, essays, letters, manifestos, communiqués, rants? They owe something to all of that, and yet they belong to none of them. I doubt

this question is important to most of its audience, but it is important to me. (At the very least I think it is worth asking why they are all roughly the same length. What is this if not a technological constraint—which ought to be interesting to those critical of technology—of zine and web writing? Not to mention the more important issue of attention spans...). When I called them prose poetry above, I was inventing an answer to this question. As prose poems, though, they immediately spoke to me in philosophical terms. I answered accordingly.

Now, what I am trying to do (here and elsewhere) is to write an essay that wanders off from the thesis. The revolutionary wager is a political proposal, but it is also, oddly, a stylistic option. Pascal's *but you have to wager* is emblematic of this style: *either* you present a thesis (one traditional way is to nail it to a door) *or* you automatically lose by saying nothing in particular.

But one can also refuse the game of the thesis. The game is played by accepting the thesis or offering another; it is refused by wandering off.

Wandering off is to show a kind of practiced incompetence in writing, in thinking—towards the thesis, at least. And much of what is classed as incompetence is in fact a sophisticated and indirect resistance. It could be called nonvoluntary. The thought *in my incompetence I resist* is a more precise instance of the realization *I am already revolting* invoked

above. The incompetence in question is something like an unconscious or semi-conscious sabotage of the performance of competence: the dreadful seriousness of willful intervention, force, self-assertion. Someone willfully incompetent finds joy in shame and embarrassment and is well positioned to discover what is glorious in failure. She dwells in the brightness of her symptomatic actions, and could go on to discover in herself the intelligence of a thousand conflicting drives, the multiplicity of passions that does not mirror the supposed totality of the world but consumes it and shatters it, as it is consumed and shattered by the world.

How does such an individual meet the friend of a friend?  
Playfully, remembering Pascal:

Dear Wolfi,

*If he praises himself, I belittle him.  
If he belittles himself, I praise him.  
And continue to contradict him  
until he understands  
That he is an unfathomable monster.<sup>7</sup>*

Yours,  
Alejandro.

### *Post-script on The Anvil*

*The Anvil*, the image, in our context, perhaps suggests first of all smashing. But here we are focusing on the base (the basis) upon which something is smashed rather than the instrument that smashes. At the same time, this Anvil also suggests the craft of slowly, patiently forging *other* instruments.

We do this by writing reviews.

An ordinary review is not much more than a more or less clever summary coupled with an appraisal, a recommendation for or against. The world is full of such reviews. (They are useful to those in a hurry.)

A review in bad taste is written entirely to dismiss a work, a set of ideas; the worst possible review exaggerates this bad taste, and, losing all critical acumen, merely hurls accusations at its author. Those who discover themselves engaging in the most ignorant expositions, the sloppiest thinking, might be invited to explore another discipline, that of silence.

It occurs to me that the superior form of a review is neither to summarize the contents of a work nor to recommend for or against it. It is rather a kind of plagiarism, simultaneously clever and clumsy. If something is in any way stimulating, worth thinking about, I prefer to respond and comment in the mode of probing curiosity, of absurd generosity. To approach what to you is strange, and to forge it into something stranger still.

## NOTES

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1. "The Revolutionary Wager", in *Willful Disobedience*, 299.  
All further page references to this book in essay.
2. Introduction to *Reasons of Flame*.
3. *Pensées*, 153–154.
4. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, 10.
5. *Les principes d'anarchie pratique et appliquée*, 19,  
translation mine.
6. *ibid.*
7. *Pensées*, 40.

## COMMENT FROM ALEX GORRION

I disagree that there is a connection, a shared habit of thought, between the experience of having a will, and seeing society as a totality. I experience my own will as a motivation behind a conversation behind the diverse and conflicting inclinations of my manyness, not at all as a negation or blinding of this manyness.

Reading of your experience of yourself as a field for possible emergent behaviors arising from tipping points in the changing balances of these inclinations reminds me of friends who have a very alienated relation with themselves, whose primary motivation to participate in that conversation is merely to listen, not believing themselves to have the right to a voice in that conversation, because they have long since involuntarily wandered off from the wager.

Seeing the individual as a field for the realization of tipping points is consistent with the new science, which has been the first to strip chaos of its mystical component, causing, among other things, destruction to no longer be a fundamentally creative act.

Yet at the same time, your words bring me the image of nineteenth century Russian revolutionaries going to the people to educate them, as Pascalian anarchists in a way, only to be met by a willful incompetence, the same form of resistance with which the peasants chronically and successfully denied

the aristocracy their due. Yet these revolutionaries, turning back to the city in frustration, eventually crafted the system that would finally succeed in eliminating the peasants, thus if we impose on them, like an anthropologist, a strategic terrain in which to evaluate their behaviors, they failed (to use Wolf's term). If, on another hand (in this case there are more than two), we simply imagine, and wonder what would have happened had they resisted by killing those evangelizing revolutionaries (particularly members of the Chaikovsky circle who included those who would form the People's Will, of all names for a group, a certain totality having coalesced in a phenomenon Landstreicher analyzes as the experience of an individual, as well as Kropotkin, who understood them as inheritors of the medieval communes) or if on the other hand they had responded more aggressively, more competently, to the travails they faced, not wandering off but attacking.

As for Landstreicher's view of the society as a totality, my only reaction is to experience this as a silly phrase, because I cannot fathom an understanding of society that sees it as a totality that could be destroyed. What is the dividing line between the institutional relations of the apparatuses that govern society, the social relations between the individuals who people it, and the material relations with the other species that surround and sustain it (or for that matter, the institutional relations with the other species, the social relations of the apparatuses, and so forth)? How could the totality of

society be destroyed without blowing up the entire planet? I suspect Landstreicher and I inhabit different societies.

In your writing, though, you at the least suggest the possibility of not entertaining a relation with the world (underlining Landstreicher's asking of how to relate with it, in that encounter, and not whether to). I appreciate the idea of walking away from the wager, but I don't understand the idea of walking away from the world, and what that would even mean, beyond a departure into an increasingly abstract and disconnected image that takes sophistic advantage of the metaphorical separateness, in most strands of Western thought, between individual and world, such that there is an individual grammatically capable of walking away from this other thing called world.

In any case, I was enthralled by your review, and your practice of the review in general.

## REPLY TO ALEX GORRION

Thanks for writing.

Some clarifications.

Last one first. “Not entertaining a relationship with the world.” This has to do with the givenness of the world, what I would dare call the quasi-existentialist view in some of what WL writes. It seems obvious that if you posit a world, you have to relate to it somehow. And when we say so-and-so is “walking away from the world” colloquially, we usually mean that the world is a metaphysical/ontological reality, and that so-and-so is taking a certain attitude towards it—the one you allude to, of detachment or disengagement. But what I am asking is whether one needs to posit a world at all, as a whole, as the horizon of experiences, as spacetime totality, or any other version of adding up what would otherwise be fragments of experience. When I speak of wandering off, I mean dissolving the experience and idea of the world. It is not necessarily a disengaged attitude. Someone unconvinced that everything hangs together might be capable of making amazing connections, because she regards them as fragile, precarious links between not-necessarily-linked facets of life.

So that is where you might not have understood me. I precisely do *not* think that “there is an individual grammatically capable of walking away from this other thing called world.” Or in any other sense than grammatical! I try to dis-

solve the individual as much as I do the world into a flux of experience to see what will happen. And if I may be said to fault WL, it is only for overemphasizing will and choice in a way that perhaps ties me too closely to myself, to individuality. He has written, of course, and will write again that The Individual is not a Cause for him. But I wonder if the way he writes about the world does not suggest the limitations of this approach.

I mean that in his writing he is always talking about doing stuff and never about not doing stuff.

When I talk about my, as you put it, "experience of [myself] as a field for possible emergent behaviors," etc. you read this largely in terms of passivity, noting that it reminds you of alienated friends, etc. I will turn the tables and say: let's not confuse salutary fragmentation and separation or alienation, all the cleavages in oneself that the critical and revolutionary traditions and thinkers have taught us to diagnose. One can be deluded in many ways. One is to delude oneself into the unity of one's self, one's will, and to act accordingly. There is deluded passivity, and deluded activity, and I am not interested in fostering either.

One can wander off from the wager because that is where the inclinations of the moment take one.

The nineteenth century Russian scene you evoke has something of a tragicomedy about it. I cannot place myself in it: which side would I take? I would have to wander off in

a third direction. I would never want to be in the position of an evangelist, revolutionary or otherwise. But it is equally foreign to me to resist evangelism on the grounds that my people don't want to change.

You accept my rejection of the idea of society as a totality on the grounds that there is too much going on here/there to see it that way. Especially as a totality that could be destroyed. Well, I think I was doing something similar with the totalization of world that his—again, not quite right term here—quasi-existentialism suggests. From there, I tried to ask if the experience of the will—maybe we could now say a certain version of that experience—was connected to the society-as-totality, or world-as-given experience.

I'm not sure I succeeded in doing anything more than asking a question. I think that is what the *Anvil* is for, and I wanted to share this questioning there (thus the ending).



**H O W Y O U *and* I M I G H T M E E T**

*My only published contribution to the short-lived egoist newspaper The Sovereign Self appeared divided between two issues, 4 and 5, in 2012. I enjoyed being an egoist so as to write this and some of the following pieces, and I believe I was afforded this voice in large part by the existence of the newspaper and conversations with its editors.*

## 1

Among the countless varieties of egoists, there are those of us who consider an ego to be a mutable process and not a static thing. We have a taste for turning ourselves inside out, for observing the birth of our selves in each passing moment.

This is a way of doing it: I consider the many Causes that I am asked to make my own and find a wide range of occasions. Sometimes the order is completely impersonal, filtered through advertising, slogans, signs and symbols, etc. Sometimes it is the less impersonal, still anonymous action of masses, crowds, or groups on my body. The remaining occasions, which I will discuss schematically here, unfold face to face; they are the most interesting, for in them there is the potential of free intercourse between egos.

Only the potential, however: face-to-face though they may be, two non-egoists never interact with each other in their singularity. More precisely, they cannot know in what ways they do. Between them is the Cause, a terrible imaginary Third, taking the form of projects, identities, ideals and ideologies, so many ways of belonging... Their intercourse is governed by the Causes they propose to each other, seeking out what they share, testing each others' belonging. Such intercourse is shared possession. This is the normal form of face-to-face intercourse in societies such as ours (some might say: in society, full stop). That is one kind of interaction. It un-

folds, an egoist says, in oblivion, in forgetfulness of self. There are two other kinds of interaction in my schema: a non-egoist may face an egoist, and (most enigmatic encounter) two egoists may meet.

A non-egoist meets an egoist: from a non-egoist, we may expect the same proposed sharing, the same fishing for binding terms of commonality, the same attempt to identify a shared Cause. It is their one and only mode. An egoist will more or less skillfully sidestep all such proposals and (if he likes) present rather aspects of his ownness, his singularity, his irreducibility. He will set out thoughts and gestures he knows he can call his own. These idiosyncratic thoughts, these marked gestures—of course the non-egoist has them. Of course two non-egoists unknowingly shower each other with them even as they seek or inhabit a common discourse. But in that exchange these thoughts and gestures are noise in the system, so many symptoms and parapraxes that lead nowhere. (“I’m so weird,” so goes the apology of those who have not earned that claim.) So for a non-egoist to have intercourse with an egoist who reveals himself as such must be something between confusion and disillusionment—neither of which, I will note, requires understanding how an egoist lives. For an egoist, on the other hand, it is a kind of maneuvering, testing—a very different sort of testing—something I imagine we all engage in to some degree or another, considering how much to say and to whom and how and why... it is, after all,

possible that some fragment of unconfessed egoism might be dislodged and set adrift in this intercourse. In this way an egoist might seduce another into an egoism of her own. (It is never entirely clear how one becomes an egoist, after all.)

Indeed, the limit-case of that intercourse is one between two egoists. It is a rare event. Here I offer a way of thinking about how such an interaction unfolds that includes some gestures towards an egoist interpretation of Freud (a game some of us pursue with pleasure). It was Freud, after all who suggested that each of us goes about our waking life drifting in and out of daydreams, composing a sort of crude novel in our heads. The protagonist of this novel is I, the Ego of the egoists, around whom events and actions unfold. In this story, the world exists, that is to say, is narrated, only insofar as this I interacts with it, bringing persons and events to life.

This is not to say that taking such a story seriously is desirable. For most of us, it probably is not. The point here is rather that desire, insofar as it is an individual's desire, has as one of its products or processes of production this fantastic story, this private novel. Now, to add a somewhat less Freudian note, an egoist will presume that the personal novels of non-egoists draw their overall plot and setting, their narrative techniques, their style insofar as they have style, from the prevailing myths and stories that issue forth from social Causes of every sort. In fact, that is how Causes might be said to operate in and through us: they are desirable, they

are desires calcified, channeled, or crystallized into more or less stable flows. Desire for the Cause is desire for its stability, so the project goes on forever and the flow looks like a form. (e.g. “This is what Democracy looks like.”) The reason I say everyone is an egoist is this irreducible centering of the I in the narrative. The question that for the unconfessed egoist remains unanswerable is: why are you the protagonist of this crude novel? An egoist relishes her protagonist role. Some of us are enamored of ourselves, some simply amused by this centering. So, no, I do not have to take my starring role in my own fantasies—it could turn out to be an absurdist novel, a comedy...

## 2

How do two egoists meet? How might you and I meet? How do two egoists share what is their own, including their preposterous protagonism in their own fantasies (e.g. not “everyone is beautiful” but “my beauty”; not “freedom for all” but “my freedom”; not “power to the people” but “my power”) when it is so obvious that the other will never be a protagonist in my novel? And that this arrangement should be unacceptable to them? Freud’s suggestions concerning the emergent novel of our daydreams and private fantasies was part of a larger attempt to explain what it is that creative writers (novelists,

poets—today we might include songwriters, film directors, etc.) do that makes their stories not only palatable but also enjoyable for many others. Freud argued that these artists' works were a public, stylized expression of their private and repugnant novels. In that sense, every work of art is a work of desire: a desire machine through which we dwell in another's fantasies as if they were our own. If an ordinary person, an unconfessed egoist, were to share their fantasies with you in an unfiltered manner, says Freud, they would leave you cold. At best. At worst, you would be repulsed. But the artists' talent is precisely that they offer us their novel in such a way that it is accompanied by a bonus of pleasure.

The bonus of pleasure appeals to egoists as well as non-egoists. A non-egoist may variously appreciate this pleasure (sometimes with guilt) or simply be overwhelmed by the way in which the artists' novel shapes their own fantasies. After all, not all pleasures are equal. There are dull pleasures of recognition and repetition; there are pleasures that come in predictable genres, like music or films. Anyone's receptivity to pleasure is the beginning of an ego-process that may be set to work socially or politically by one or more Causes. At one limit, simple enjoyment of art (is this anything more than an abstraction in a society like ours?) —at the other, instrumentalized pleasure, the deployment of an enjoyment-machine, organized desires with their outcome. Desire for the Cause actualized as pleasure in a certain kind of story: the repugnant

novel as the private fantasies of a non-egoist, who cannot pin-point what in it is his.

So there is a difference. An egoist is in the constant process of distinguishing what pleasures are hers. This process gives non-moral sense to certain ethical or life choices. Compare someone who argues morally against drinking alcohol, for example, claiming that it is not a pleasure or that the pleasure in it is a bad pleasure, perverse or unhealthy, with someone who refuses to drink while acknowledging that drink and drunkenness are pleasures for others, saying, in brief: it is not my pleasure. Extending this logic, it should be clear that the meeting of two egoists might result in no intercourse whatsoever. We might repel each other completely. But to the degree that we are attracted to each other (which of course does not exclude, at other levels, repulsion) we must be succeeding in holding out singular traits that we manage to make pleasurable experiences for the other. To the degree that this exchange continues, there is intercourse between egoists. And to this exact degree we are behaving as Freud says the creative writer does. I offer you my repugnant novel with a bonus of pleasure that might make it palatable for you. You offer me yours. You may not accept any of mine, or only certain parts. I will do the same with your stories. The bonus of pleasure is a lure for desire, the lubrication for dwelling in each other's fantasies. This should be made easier by the aesthetic interest an egoist has in another egoists' process of

narrating her life, which brings out precisely the break from the Causes, what is singular or remarkable, as opposed to the assumed sharing and prefabricated commonalities offered by non-egoists.

I wrote earlier that what is shared is gesture as well as thought. I like the word *intercourse* because of its many senses: fantasies demand to be transformed into gesture and dance in certain sorts of erotic interactions, in a sphere far from the flatness of what is usually called consent. What is at work in such intercourse is rather a kind of seduction. Reciprocal participation of egos that cannot be possessed: an orgasmic paradox. An egoist more than anyone understands that voluntary association, if it is to be a force in her life, has at the limit to be synonymous with good taste. The only acceptable sense of social participation is not in the Cause, but in the reveries of another ego, well chosen. It is acceptable only insofar as it remains voluntary and reciprocal. This must mean: partial. And yet, from within the participation, in certain moments it may feel neither voluntary nor reciprocal. Such is desire. This is not a problem for those who feel ego as process: participation is a passing mutation in the process. I do not know why it begins—how or why another ego is seductive; nor do I know exactly how or why participation breaks down, only that it does, and I re-enter my fascinating solitude.

I would even go so far as to say that, in the play of participation between egoists, there emerges (temporarily, ten-

uously) something like a society—in the more archaic sense of the word. It is not the gregarious society I shrug off because it is in bad taste. What is in good taste for an egoist? On one hand, my fascinating solitude, the self-love and amusement of a novel everyone else rightfully ought to find repugnant; on the other, the microscopic society I might have in passing with another egoist in a union that, as Stirner wrote, “is at bottom beyond what is called opposition, but without having sunk back into unity and unison.” That is how you and I might meet.

A LESSON *in* DESIRE

*Intended as a second contribution to The Sovereign Self, this little meditation was also written in 2012. The newspaper ceased publication before this piece could appear. As with “History as Decomposition” in The Impossible, Patience, and what is collected in the book Impasses, it is also a snapshot, however blurry, of some of what went on in the Austin Anarchist Study group around this time.*

## 1

This essay concerns a way I have of studying the Normals, those unconfessed egoists I encounter around me, so as to improve my analytic techniques; I do it to increase my power of understanding and thereby my power overall. Another title for it could have been: "A New Use for Crowds".

The anarchist reading group that I participate in recently read an article on polyamory that, nearing its conclusion, offers the following meditation:

Sometimes while I ride the subway I try to look at each person and imagine what they look like to someone who is totally in love with them. I think everyone has had someone look at them that way, whether it was a lover, or a parent, or a friend, whether they know it or not. It's a wonderful thing, to look at someone to whom I would never be attracted and think about what looking at them feels like to someone who is devouring every part of their image, who has invisible strings that are connected to this person tied to every part of their body. I think this fun pastime is a way of cultivating compassion. It feels good to think about people that way, and to use that part of my mind that I think is traditionally reserved for a tiny portion of people I'll meet in my life to appreciate the general public. I wish I thought about people like this more often. I think it's the opposite of what our culture

teaches us to do. We prefer to pick people apart to find their flaws. Cultivating these feelings of love or appreciation for random people, and even for people I don't like, makes me a more forgiving and appreciative person toward myself and people I love. Also, it's just a really excellent pastime.

It seems to me that this meditation is proposed for two main reasons. One is a way of getting better at polyamory by practicing the loving appreciation of strangers. It may or may not work that way, but I think its imaginary premise should not be so quickly conflated with reality. I do not think that everyone, each individual, has had someone look at them lovingly. When we read: "I think everyone has had someone look at them that way..." our writer sounds overly enthusiastic. For me the tone or meaning of this meditation is very different. In some cases, I may be gaining an appreciation of the many ways love may be expressed. But not always. What am I doing when I imagine as beloved those who never have been? Misunderstanding them, and deluding myself.

But perhaps the idea of visualizing love so as to get better at love (and sex) is too instrumental an account of this meditation. Our writer also hints at a more expansive, perhaps even spiritual version: it might make me more compassionate, forgiving, appreciative. Now, about the desirability of such traits, I feel entirely neutral. Here I will merely ask: why is it assumed that I want to cultivate compassion or love?

Why is it supposed that I want to be more forgiving or appreciative? I cannot answer these questions without asking: for whom? Towards whom? Someone who does not stop to ask such questions can only admit more or less openly that they are responding to an injunction to love everybody. But I do not feel this injunction. Or, when I do, I feel no duty to adhere to it. For me, forceful though it may be, this command is imaginary. In its religious and secular variants, the injunction to love everybody is, like every other Cause, all too meaningful in the short run, but ultimately nonsensical.

Were it my project to love more, I might engage in the love meditation. But I think that loving more in this sense is deluded. When I do it right, says our writer, I summon up at least one lover for each person. I say these lovers are imaginary most of the time. The ideal imaginary lover is called, in a secular version, Man; in a religious version, God. In each case there is supposed to be love from a greater subject (Humanity, God) and an implicit command to, in reciprocity, love all insofar as they are part of, possessed by, that greater subject. Two versions of the Cause of Love.

I would like to offer a different meditation here, one that I practice in similar situations. My meditation involves no injunction to love. I look at each individual around me and think not of love but of desire. I conceive of their body as a body of desire, their words as desiring words, their gestures and postures as desiring movements or stillnesses of desire.

I would rather not think of everyone as loving, or having been loved, because when I do so I feel dragged into delusion. I feel myself signing up for service in the Cause of Love. I *can* think of each individual that I discover as a creature of desire. (Some friends might prefer to use the word *will* here; I accept.) And this is, from the point of view of the meditation I quoted above, certainly not picking people apart to find their flaws. I *am* picking people apart (it is called *analysis* when one is not being moralistic), and the so-called flaws are what I am looking for because it is in the incongruities between an individual and his massified self-image, in the poor fit between her desires and her position in the group, that I will discover desire and will. In what forms, what modes?

If I prefer my own meditation most of the time, it is because I think it tells us more about the individuals around us. Undeniably, these individuals are desiring bodies. Only sometimes are they loving, beloved bodies. Love in its singularity, one ego somehow choosing another, is but one turn

desire may take; rather than go down the spiritual path of Love and its Cause, I prefer to witness desire expressed or repressed, seduced out of people or beaten into submission; desire focused, obsessed, on an electronic gadget, a posture or pose, an item of clothing, a way of speaking or looking at others; desire distracted, the will diffused, everywhere at once, the Normals lost in their crowds, these people lost in their scenes and scenarios, these bodies wandering down the street, sitting in long spells of boredom... again, in crowds. Yes, most of what this meditation will reveal are crowd phenomena. And I think I have just discovered the sole redeeming aspect of crowds for an egoist.

I am not lost in love or the crowd. I am also a creature of desire and will; I am attracted to or repulsed by each individual body. There is no universal relation between us, no Cause of Love or any other sort. There is certainly no Cause of Desire, because desire resists steady obedience in a way adoring love never can. For desire is repulsion as well as attraction. (Of course, there is an egoist practice of love, of choosing another and perhaps accepting being chosen as well, but this would obviously have nothing to do with an injunction to love everybody; to the contrary, it is the mutual selection, in its unlikeness, that is of supreme interest.)

I resist the invitation to gaze into the crowd and dream up beloved and loving individuals. The Normals have not manifested themselves to me as individuals. My curiosity, my em-

pathy for them is something I understand in terms of my own desire, my own will; and what I want is to meet other egoists. When I meditatively gaze into the crowd, I find no egoists, none who have *confessed*, at least. If these individual bodies that compose the crowd are creatures of will and desire, it is will subordinated to others, desire invested in gregariousness. If it is my project to understand the ridiculousness, cruelty, anxiety, fear, and so on that surround me on even the calmest of days, I will study everything in the range from unpleasant to disturbing that characterizes the crowd. I will not dream of an ideal lover for each individual; I will understand the society in which this is impossible. Facing the usually unpleasant sight of the crowd, I sharpen my analytical skills. I become smarter, stronger. I engage in the meditation I call: *a lesson in desire*.

**LOVE/BOREDOM**

*This experiment is in my mind coupled to the previous piece, though it predates it by many years. It is excerpted from a much larger project I have conceived under various titles at various times. One was An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Boredom.*

Supposing Boredom is the realm of  
the everyday, the uncomfortable fiction of

my life. Supposing that Love, in  
its full, romantic sense (its religious,

credulous, fabulous senses) is also a  
fiction, my private version being another

*repugnant novel*, the public version being  
banal and boring. Supposing *that* is

so because all the time one  
finds one's loves boring, or one

is bored around them (and this  
seems to belie the fiction!). Then

one who is deeply skeptical about  
Love might still amuse himself in

calling a chosen few *lovers*, code  
for *those who in our intimacy*

*reveal to me my everyday life.*  
The fiction breaks down when, despite

the repugnant novel, I recognize that  
I am not destined for Love,

or dedicated to it at all.

On the other side the undesirable

connotations of boredom break down when  
I realize that I am interested

in my everyday life (the repugnant  
novel, and not the banal narrative:

precisely the repugnant details of the  
repugnant novel are what is to

be arranged more artfully once I  
become aware of them as constructions).

In this sense, boredom or love,  
*when properly managed, is the source*

*of all politeness and refinement.*<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

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1. Hume, "Of National Characters", in *Selected Essays*, 125.



THE SPACE NOW SPACED

*Poem-fragment from 2006.*

Irresponsible friends, how we return to domestic bliss  
*We forgot*   *we tried to find out*

Inevitable friends, how I invite you to reversal of said  
sadness   the domestic trap-feeling

Indestructible friends, how your atomic vision peels open  
to show your cruelty                                   your little trickery

Irreparable friends, how a life from this world, soul-like, yours,  
wanders into painful gaps                                   of attention and energies



## CYNICAL LESSONS

*This essay, written in 2011 and printed in The Anvil Review 3 in 2012, perhaps best responds to the editors' intentions for that publication. Whereas with the review of Willful Disobedience, my task was to make strange a book-object produced by and for the anarchist milieu, here it was to make available a book whose context is academic and scholarly, to reveal how much life is hidden in its pages.*

*There were always men who practiced this philosophy.  
For it seems to be in some ways a universal  
philosophy, and the most natural.*  
— Julian the Apostate

# I

Some months ago, I discovered a series of books on ancient philosophies produced by the University of California Press, with lovely details of Baroque paintings reproduced on the covers. The titles read: *Stoicism, Epicureanism, Neoplatonism, Ancient Scepticism... Cynics*. That last title immediately drew my attention: *Cynics* and not *Cynicism*. It turned out that *Cynics* makes explicit reference to anarchist ideas in a way that is both intelligent and important to at least some of us. (I will return to this intersection.)

The choice of the title *Cynics* for William Desmond's contribution was probably only meant to avoid confusion, but it also suggests a way to read the book so as to learn not merely of the Cynics but from them. Why is it not called *Cynicism*? True, from one point of view it is perfectly easy to say that there is Cynicism because we can list tenets held in common by Cynics. Textbooks, encyclopedias and dictionaries do this: in any of them we can learn that these people favored

what Desmond calls *carefree living in the present*<sup>1</sup>; and that, to accomplish it, they practiced a generalized rejection of social customs (Desmond catalogs this rejection in delightful detail: it includes customs concerning clothing, housing, diet, sex and marriage, slavery, work ...) in the direction of a simplification of life.<sup>2</sup> (This was somewhat more confusingly referred to as living in accord with nature.)

But already in the ancient world, Diogenes Laertius, author of the great gossip-book of ancient philosophers, commented:

*we will go on to append the doctrines which they held in common—if, that is, we decide that Cynicism is really a philosophy, and not, as some maintain, just a way of life.*<sup>3</sup>

One of the perpetual question marks hanging next to the Cynics' status as philosophers is their common rejection of intellectual confusion. The term *typhos* (smoke, vapor) rightly emphasized by Desmond sums this up nicely. It was used, he writes,

*to denote the delirium of popular ideas and conventions.*  
(244)

*Typhos* also included the “technical language” of philosophers: *the best cure for it is to speak simply* (127).

In any case, there is also certainly something called *cynicism*. Desmond consciously capitalizes the word when it is a matter of the school, and leaves it uncapitalized when it is a matter of what could be called the ambient attitude of

a place and time—something people definitely live, but in no way choose or wish for. Something like that seems to be what Deleuze and Guattari were after in their recurring references to a special relation between capitalism and cynicism in the *Anti-Oedipus*: cynicism as the correlate of modern bad conscience,

*accompanied by a strange piety.*<sup>4</sup>

Cynicism, for them, is not so much the ideology of capitalism, as it is a congeries of behaviors and attitudes secreted by the capitalist *socius*, the apparent apathy that is ever becoming real, but never for all that passing into a reasoned or passionate way of life. It is rather the default lifestyle of those for whom a way of life (in any interesting sense of the phrase) is impossible.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this, I propose that perhaps the most interesting perspective is to say that there is no Cynicism, that there is cynicism, and that there are (or at least were) Cynics, as individuals.

Whereas the usual philosophical guidebook (and, worse, the usual philosophical conversation) starts with the Great Question *what is...* I propose instead the question *who is...* *Who* is a Cynic? This question never disappears: even when we find great commonalities between different Cynics, we are still dealing with its familiar variant: *who is the real Cynic?* We know that Cynics first appeared in the Greece of Socrates and

Plato, and that there were Cynics well into Christian times. How do we know this? As with other ancient schools, its inventors, creators of a way of life, wrote nothing, or their writings are lost. We know of them through what is now called doxography: collections of sayings and opinions. Desmond recompiles and rearranges the doxographies charmingly, proving the point that if it is philosophy as a way of life that we are interested in, perhaps a few anecdotes about a singular character are as valuable as a short treatise or a letter to a friend. (I recall here Nietzsche's gnomic proposition:

*It is possible to present the image of a man in three anecdotes.<sup>6</sup>)*

In behavior and intent, The Cynics we know of were *missionary* (as Pierre Hadot has put it).<sup>7</sup> Their rejection of customs seems to have had an essentially performative, confrontational aspect. Desmond illustrates this as follows:

... the ancient Cynic could be stereotyped as a wild man who stood on the corner piercing passers-by with his glances, passing remarks to all and sundry, but reserving his bitterest scorn for the elites who parade by in purple and chariots, living unnatural lives, and trampling on the natural equality of man.

(187)

Such confrontations in public places were one way in which the Cynic way of life was communicated. How does one be-

come a Cynic? By example, obviously; by means of a model. Now, this anecdote tells of a more intimate communication:

Metrocles had been studying with Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle and head of the Lyceum, a taxonomist and classificatory thinker with a specialty in botany. Once while declaiming Metrocles farted audibly and was so ashamed that he shut himself off from public view and thought of starving himself to death. But Crates visited him, fed him with lupin-beans, and advanced various arguments to convince him that his action was not wrong or unnatural, and had been for the best in fact. Then Crates capped his exhortation with a great fart of his own. "From that day on Metrocles started to listen to Crates' discourses and became a capable man in philosophy." (28)<sup>8</sup>

This intimate aspect is not emphasized in Desmond's book, perhaps for lack of evidence. One could go a long ways in the direction of answering the question *who can be a Cynic?* by considering the status of customs and laws from the perspective of how people have become capable of subverting them. I do not mean conferring a special status on transgression as a social or philosophical category, but rather becoming curious about *who* it is that grasps the instability of mores, conventions, laws and so on, and how they become capable of selectively ignoring them.

Consider then this couple: unusual public behavior/anecdote documenting the same. As Desmond points out, a typical *chreia* or anecdote related an action followed by a witty, insightful, or bluntly truthful utterance. It would seem that the anecdote was simultaneously a spoken rhetorical device and a genre of literature, both in close relation to what is best about gossip. There were many compilations of such anecdotes in the ancient world. It is not hard to imagine that these anthologies were compiled so as to amuse the curious; but they could also have brought about, at a distance and thanks to a certain sort of reading, the transmission of a model that public harangues and private obscenities can communicate face to face, body to body. I mean the imitation of unusual behaviors, and, more importantly, a stimulation to invent new ones relevant to one's own life. This literary transmission of the Cynic life has surely happened many times and in many ways.

Long after the first generations came lengthier written texts either advocating the Cynical way of life or at least presenting it in a favorable light. But by then the writers' commitment to the way of life was in question. It is one version of the question *Who is the real Cynic?* Desmond discusses, though does not promote, a common distinction between original "hard" Cynics (Diogenes, Crates, Hipparchia) who lived the

life and derivative “soft” Cynics, who, fascinated by it, merely wrote about it (Lucian, Dio Chrysostom). It is, of course, as a distant echo of this supposed merely literary presence of the school that the term *cynic* reappears as an ordinary noun, and eventually as a pejorative term, bringing the question *who?* full circle from punctual designation to anonymous epithet.

One example of the richness of this question’s persistence in the literary transmission of Cynicism is Lucian’s *The Death of Peregrinus*. Desmond mentions it briefly; I will take it up in some detail. In this satire we learn of the life and spectacular death of the “ill-starred” Peregrinus the Cynic.<sup>9</sup> As the satire opens, Theagenes, a fearful, crying Cynic (?) gives a hoary speech in praise of Peregrinus; then a nameless, laughing man mounts the same platform to tell the truth. (This man is not identified as a Cynic.) He dismisses Theagenes’ praise as well as his tears. Instead he offers his laughter, and another perspective on Peregrinus. He details, among other things, how Peregrinus started life as a good-for-nothing, becoming a parricide in exile after strangling his own father for no reason other than the inconvenience of caring for an old man. In exile Peregrinus eventually transformed himself, managing to become a well-respected Christian leader. As such, he was imprisoned, and received all of their support. Once freed, he betrayed the Christians. Setting off again, he became a Cynic and trained in ascetic exercises. These were the *ponoi*, practices Cynics would use to loosen the bonds

of custom: Peregrinus shaved half his head, smeared his face with mud, masturbated in public, beat and was beaten with a fennel cane, etc. Eventually his love of glory and attention led him to his famous self-immolation, the event that Lucian ruthlessly mocks as a failed apotheosis. Having publicly announced it years in advance, Peregrinus killed himself by jumping into an enormous pyre before countless witnesses at the Olympic festival. This was purportedly done to show others that they need not fear death. Lucian, now present as the narrator, places himself, laughing, at the scene of the pyre, describing Peregrinus and Theagenes as pitiful actors. Lucian is not only unimpressed: he calls the witnesses "idiots", and retires. In the scenes of the aftermath, Lucian converses with curious passers-by and latecomers, answering their idle questions with preposterous and contradictory exaggerations.

It seems that, for Lucian, to say one is a Cynic, even to have trained in the ascetic exercises, means nothing special if in the present one continues to demonstrate vanity. And nothing could be more vain than capitalizing on one's own suicide by announcing it years in advance. Here Lucian, who never called himself a Cynic, shows himself capable of wearing that mask in his satire. He addresses an interlocutor:

... I can hear you crying out, as you well might:  
"Oh, the stupidity! Oh, the thirst for renown!  
Oh—", all the other things we tend to say about  
them. Well, you can say all this at a distance and

much more safely; but I said it right by the fire,  
and even before that in a large crowd of listeners.  
Some of these became angry, the ones who were  
impressed by the old man's lunacy; but there were  
others who laughed at him too. Yet I can tell you I  
was nearly torn to pieces by the Cynics...<sup>10</sup>

The entire story revolves around the question: *who*? Lucian's Peregrinus cynically moves from low-life to moral Christian to ascetic Cynic to vainglorious blowhard. Is this progression Cynical? Or is Lucian's laughter more of a Cynic effect, however he may have lived?

Desmond, for his part, suggests that much of Lucian's satire may be a "hatchet job", such as the account of the paricide, for example. Considering this takes us one turn further into the maze of the question: *who*? What if it is Lucian, the writer, who is the vainglorious one, envious of Peregrinus' performance, its practical philosophy? What if, for example, Peregrinus had an excellent reason to take his own life, and opted to use his death to teach a final lesson, one the results of which he could not live to see? Could that not be the opposite of vanity? For me this ambiguity manifests a tension between way of life and philosophy, or, again, between living according to nature and a missionary urge to harangue others to do the same.<sup>11</sup>

Lucian calls Peregrinus an actor, his suicide a "performance". Discussing the history of the well-worn metaphor

of the world as theater, the philologist Ernst Robert Curtius traces it back to comments in Plato's *Laws* about humans as puppets of the gods, or to a phrase in his *Philebus* about the *tragedy and comedy of life*.

But then he notes:

*In the popular lectures on philosophy ('diatribes') of the Cynics, the comparison of man to an actor became a much-used cliché.<sup>12</sup>*

This story of origins only becomes interesting when we read between the lines in Curtius, noticing that it must have been the Cynics who began using this metaphor without reference to the divine, and perhaps not as a metaphor at all. Simply put: everyone is an actor. Desmond writes:

if the self is substantial and secure in itself, then, like a good actor, it can put on and off many masks, playing many roles without dissipating or compromising itself, just as a good actor can appear in many guises while remaining the same person beneath. (182)<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the reception of this idea, metaphor or not, which Curtius traces from the Romans through the Middle Ages to Shakespeare, Baltasar Gracián, and Calderón, may be studied along at least two axes: *who* takes the world-theater to be a divine place? *Who* does not? And: *who* says there is anything behind the actor's masks? Who does not? About Lucian and Peregrinus, Desmond writes:

Peregrinus was rightly named Proteus because he was as adaptable and many-masked as the Old Man of the Sea. He took many shapes and professed not to be changed by any. Lucian scoffs, but Peregrinus' own intention in his last "role" as a latter-day Hercules may have been to demonstrate that external flames and a melting body cannot harm "the god within." (182)

That would be the case for saying that there is someone behind the mask. Something like Lucian's laughter would be the case for saying that there is not, or that what is behind the mask is another mask, or that it does not really matter... Now we might have begun to understand what is vital in the couple behavior/anecdote. It is a tension, an intimate challenge, a kind of existential dare, that can only be resolved or transformed in one's own life and body.

### 3

I have mentioned the list of titles in the series: *Stoicism, Epicureanism, Neoplatonism, Ancient Scepticism ... Cynics*. When I gazed upon the gathered books I felt I was not merely looking at a list of didactic books aimed at a curious and intelligent student. I also felt that I had before me a series of manuals, or at least fragments of manuals concerning ways of life that are perhaps still available. (Notice that someone

claiming that the Cynic way of life is no longer available could be accused of taking a cynical position.) Grasped as manuals they suggest a different sort of curiosity, and perhaps another aspect of intelligence as well. I have advocated for a pragmatic use of certain anthropology books along the same lines, as manuals concerning the organization and disorganization of social and cultural life, available to all. This sort of reading is obviously also in some sense a willful misappropriation, or at least a misreading; something else than the conventional use of such texts. It has two facets: the patience of engagement with the text (one cannot simply call it plagiarism or 'stealing ideas'); the impatience, or maybe hurried patience, concerning whatever in it is significant enough to draw into one's life as an urgent problem, challenge, or question...

That said, I would like to consider that the Cynic way of life is impossible. Maybe no one could embody their way of life perfectly, avoiding the ambiguities brought about by the public aspect of the example or the harangue. Or at least, if someone did, it was in a way that was inimitable and so incomunicable. Historically speaking, such perfect Cynics must have disappeared. I recall the first day I spoke in public of the Cynics. One of my strange teachers was present; he said something like: *What about the Cynics who were such perfect masters that they disappeared?* At the time, I did not know how to respond. Perhaps I was confused. I now find his question calming, in two perhaps contradictory ways.

First, if we suppose that the real Cynics disappeared, we can be untroubled about finding real Cynics; we can assume that we never will. The use of the question *who is a Cynic?* is modified accordingly: we will expect to find masks, semblances, references. Imperfect embodiment is still embodiment, and literature is still (is very much so!) life.

Secondly, however, one can certainly disappear *to* the historical record without disappearing *from* the historical record. One's life can just as much be expressed in an anecdote as hidden within it. (Or both, which is what I suppose Nietzsche meant: the best anecdotes reveal and conceal at once. Otherwise we are collecting bad gossip, trivia, distractions, *typhos*.) This idea of disappearing (of secrecy, or of clandestinity) could be used to finally dispose of the seriousness behind the question *who is the real Cynic?*, dissolving the distinction between "hard" and "soft" Cynics: the first might have written all manner of things, an exquisite and singular literature which they destroyed or shared with a very few; the latter might have undertaken countless ascetic exercises, from the ridiculous to the grotesque, but opted not to record them and disallowed others from reporting on them. All of this is intimately related to the problem of vanity at stake between Lucian and his character Peregrinus; it also shows much of what is at stake in the difference between ancient or medieval ways of life and our so-called lifestyles.

I conclude by discussing the interesting references to anarchist ideas in *Cynics*. This has great interest for me and mine. One of my companions, when I showed him, patted me on the back and said something like: *See, now our movements are points of reference for everything, even for a book on ancient philosophy!* At which point I cringed twice, once for the phrase *our movements* and again for the pat on the back, that little victorious sentiment... I do not think that is exactly what is interesting here. That Desmond makes the reference is indeed noteworthy, especially given the clearly pedagogical intent of his book.<sup>14</sup> But at the same time, that is not a reason for us to be comforted; rather, it is a matter of curiosity, a reason to think differently about who we suppose we are and what we suppose we are doing. I mean that we could provisionally accept the connection he makes, taking everything he writes about the Cynics as an intimate challenge.

When he calls the Cynics anarchists, Desmond confesses this is just *the most convenient label* for them. Of course:

... they renounced the authority of officialdom and of social tradition: not marrying; not claiming citizenship in their native or adopted cities; not holding political office; not voting in the assembly or courts; not exercising in the gymnasium or marching with the city militia; and not respecting

political leaders... To be free is to have no master, whether that master be a god, political assembly, magistrate, general, or spouse. (185)

But Desmond thinks, as many or most do, of anarchism as a form of politics, and so restricts the Cynic-anarchist connection to the rejection of certain forms of political organization. On this side of the question, he generalizes to the point of grotesque error: it is not true that, as he seems to think, all anarchists think humans are fundamentally good, or that life without the state is better because it is more natural than life under it. On the other hand, calling Cynics anarchists is compelling in that they did not form parties or foment revolutions. So it is precisely to those anarchists most suspicious of such activities that this comparison will be interesting.

For me, the import of this is to show the tense relation, or non-relation, between the Cynics' concern with ethics (a way of life) above all, and the various political stages of the world, with all of their *typhos*. One could anachronistically call them a subculture; this would be useful precisely to the degree that it allows us to focus on how they both maintained a way of life and did not entirely disappear in the doing. That is: it is arguably the public aspect of their way of life that brought them to these various platforms.

Desmond does not call the Cynics anarchists and leave it at that; he also suggests that the same Cynics could be called democrats, kings, or cosmopolitans. Indeed, for what does

“carefree living in the present” especially have to do with the State or its rejection? Instead of asking: *what is Cynic politics?* we can ask: *who is the Cynic when she does this, when he says that...?* Let us say provisionally that the Cynics were playing with, playing at politics, insofar as its cloudy stages are also so many platforms from which to launch the perhaps inevitable diatribe. They were democrats, because in so doing they discovered a way of simultaneously inhabiting and resisting their dominant political environment, pushing it in a radically egalitarian or at least populist direction (Desmond reminds us that for many *democracy* essentially meant *rule by the poor* (188)). But the democratic assembly is also a place to practice comic wit! And the funniest thing is to call oneself a king. Well, why not? It is much funnier than calling oneself an anarchist or a democrat! Cynics are kings in rags (57).<sup>15</sup> As with democracy, Desmond suggests that what we have here is an intelligent exaggeration, a pushing to the limit, of another ancient commonplace: that the best should rule.

The poor Cynic can claim to be a “king” because in his wild, unconventional life he has recovered all the natural virtues: courage, temperance, simplicity, freedom, and, most of all, *philanthropia*. As “kings” who try to lead people to a life “according to nature,” they are acting only in the people’s best interest. They alone love mankind, and so in comparison with them, Sardanapallus, Xerxes,

Philip, Alexander, Antigonus, Seleucus, Ptolemy, Nero, Vespasian, Domitian and the rest are only gangsters. (199)

They are, or aspire to be, monarchs in the only non-deluded sense of the word. And cosmopolitans? It seems that at least some of them *did* use this term. And here again we have what seems to be a provocation. Since the polis was the only available sense of *state*, to claim to be a citizen of the cosmos is to express oneself through paradox. “How can one be a *citizen* of the totality and its vast spaces? Can one make the cosmos one’s *home*? ... Diogenes implies that only the Cynic wanderer is truly at home anywhere” (205). I conclude that this mixture of paradoxical and provocative attitudes is more interesting than opting for any one Cynic politics.

Keeping this in mind, what happens when we return to the initial connection and make it operate in the other direction, asking: are anarchists Cynics? Could anarchists (really) be Cynics?<sup>16</sup> As with other practices or ideas that interest me, for example those of the Situationists and Nihilists (there might even be people clever enough to play this game with the word *communist!*), I feel the need to keep asking the question *who is...?* which is, among other things, the perspectival question of the true and false.<sup>17</sup> This is not a matter of identity or identification, of clarifying or purifying our essence. It means, among other things, asking if there are anarchists who, instead of considering their activities solely as a politics

(‘anarchism’), understand what they do as aspects of a way of life distributed unevenly between political activities in the ordinary sense, micropolitical activities, and anti- or non-political activities—even inactivities? Are there anarchists who experience their lives as the ultimate criterion, instead of some goal or cause? If so, they will find plenty of interest in a manual entitled *Cynics*.

Yes, someone could read this book as a manual; someone could begin a revaluation of anarchist activities stimulated by the example of the Cynics. In that direction, I conclude with an outline of topics for immediate discussion and implementation:

1. What is *typhos* to you? I think of this as a promising alternative to terms such as *ideology* or *spectacle*.  
Rather than deploying a true-false, reality-appearance dichotomy (the starting point of so many boring conversations), to me *typhos* suggests an intimate, personal, singular limit. It is the limit of my interest in the world, in the ideas and experiences of others, and in some of my own ideas and experiences as well. *Beyond this limit*, I can make a habit of thinking, *all is smoke, vapor, typhos*. Ah, the detestable convergence of the uninteresting and the confusing...
2. What are your forms of ascetic exercises, your *ponoi*?  
I know many people who have shaved half of their

head, some who are dirty enough to be said to have caked mud on themselves, a few who have masturbated in public... what kinds of situations can you get yourselves into that exemplify, not in principle but in fact, detachment from what you wish to detach yourself from? Instead of contending with others about interpretations of the world, you could bend your urge to compete in the direction of increasingly absurd or confrontational public acts. It is stimulating to imagine how, violating before me a custom concerning sexuality, you could provoke me to go and violate one concerning diet or work.

3. In thinking through the first topic and living out the second, who can truly describe themselves as *laughing a lot and taking nothing seriously?* (65)<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

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1. *Cynics*, 65. All further references in the essay.
2. An account of this simplification as a de-culturing, perhaps de-civilizing process, perhaps more palatable to some, can be found in Nietzsche: "The Cynic knows the connection between the more highly cultivated man's stronger and more numerous pains, and his profuse needs; therefore he understands that manifold opinions about beauty, propriety, seemliness, and delight must give rise to very rich sources of pleasure, but also to sources of discontent. In accordance with this insight, the Cynic educates himself retrogressively by giving up many of these opinions and withdrawing from the demands of culture. In that way, he achieves a feeling of freedom and of strengthening..." *Human, All Too Human* § 275.
3. *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI, 103.
4. *Anti-Oedipus*, 225.
5. Question: does awareness matter in all this? Those who become aware of ambient cynicism and how it has affected or shaped their social personas: could they be on the way to becoming Cynics? It cannot be so

simple. Deleuze and Guattari's reference to *a strange piety* invites us to consider contemporary cynicism as the cynicism of the credulous. I do not have much of a taste for discussing capitalism as such, but it would be interesting to consider modern cynics in Deleuze and Guattari's sense as those descended, though not without a series of sociocultural mutations, from those Hume called the superstitious. Precisely with this difference: modern cynics are superstitious, and they know it, and they are resigned to it.

6. *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 25.
7. *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 108. The Cynic faces the crowd and "scold[s] to his heart's content", as Nietzsche puts it (*Human, All Too Human*, § 275).
8. The last sentence is cited from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI.
9. Lucian, "The Death of Peregrinus," in *Selected Dialogues*, 74.
10. Lucian, 75.
11. A fascinating discussion of these sorts of reversals, based on a famous anecdote involving Diogenes the

Cynic and Alexander the Great, appears in Part 4, “Friar”, of Michel Serres’ *Detachment*.

12. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 138.
13. This is one of the few places where Desmond seems to go too fast, overstepping his doxographical task. I find no correlate in the texts he discusses to any such substantial concept of the self, which I take to be a more recent invention. The same problem occurs in the definition of *typhos* that I cited above: “...insubstantial ‘smoke’ in relation to the self and its present experiences, which alone can be known and possessed.” For me the highly abstract concept of the self is more likely to be another example of *typhos*.
14. His reference in making this connection ultimately seems to be Kropotkin’s *Britannica* article of 1911 on “Anarchism”, in which Zeno of Citium is given as an early inspiration. Zeno, founder of the Stoic school, was a student of Crates the Cynic. (It would be tremendously satisfying to discover a story about the two involving farts or something comparable, to embarrass the seekers of noble origins.)
15. As Dio Chrysostom put it, alluding to the figure of Odysseus. In his “Fourth Discourse on Kingship”, Dio imagines a version of the anecdotal dialogue between

Diogenes the Cynic and Alexander the Great in which he prepares the idea of *kings in rags* by undermining the conventional understanding of monarchy.

And Alexander said: ‘Apparently you do not hold even the Great King to be a king, do you?’

And Diogenes with a smile replied, ‘No more, Alexander, than I do my little finger.’ ‘But shall I not be a great king,’ Alexander asked, ‘when once I have overthrown him?’

‘Yes, but not for that reason,’ replied Diogenes; ‘for not even when boys play the game to which the boys themselves give the name “kings” is the winner really a king. The boys, anyhow, know that the winner who has the title of “king” is only the son of a shoemaker or a carpenter—and he ought to be learning his father’s trade, but he has played truant and is now playing with the other boys, and he fancies that now of all times he is engaged in a serious business—and sometimes the “king” is even a slave who has deserted his master. Now perhaps you kings are also doing something like that: each of you has playmates . . .’ (46-48)

16. There are multiple ways to understand this question. It might be interesting to compare it, and its possible answers, with a topic of scholarly controversy discussed by Desmond: *was Jesus a Cynic?* (211-216). Naturally, the mere question would disturb the average Christian:

if Jesus was a Cynic, then the entirety of the Christian religion is an colossal misunderstanding at best, a vile imposture at worst. Does the correlation of Cynics and anarchists similarly unground ‘anarchism’?

17. The parallels are obvious: there are vague epithets, a noun and an adjective, for cynics and anarchists alike; there are Cynics and anarchists, and there may or may not be Cynicism or Anarchism, depending on who you ask. But *who is...?* is also the question of possible and impossible positions: *Who can be a Cynic?* So, for example, in the aphorism cited above, Nietzsche writes that the gentle Epicureans had the same perspective as the Cynics: *between the two there is usually only a difference in temperament.*
18. The quote is from Lucian.

# **ABSOLUTE TYPHOS**

*This essay was written in late 2012 and early 2013. It has several layers. Most fundamentally it emerges from an old plan for serial essay-writing, in which each essay should defend an indefensible proposition. It is also a sequel to the previous essay on the Cynics, allowing a harsher perspective on the idea of Spectacle, which had appeared in a number of other texts I was working on at the time. Finally, it was written in mind of the approach taken in the Sovereign Self pieces—it certainly recollects their voice—and was intended for publication in a follow-up of sorts to that newspaper which has yet to appear.*

In a book on the ancient Greek Cynic philosophers I reviewed for the *Anvil* two years ago, I noted with interest the Cynics' use of the term *typhos*. This word, which in ordinary usage meant *smoke* or *vapor*, was used by them "to denote the delirium of popular ideas and conventions."<sup>1</sup> The author of the book adds:

For the Cynics, these are insubstantial 'smoke' in comparison with the self and its present experiences, which alone can be known and possessed. One Cynic goal is *atyphia*, complete freedom from *typhos*.

The idea seems to have been one of mental obnubilation. In some provocations at the end of the review, I asked:

What is *typhos* to you? I think of this as a promising alternative to terms such as *ideology* or *spectacle*. Rather than deploying a true-false, reality-appearance dichotomy (the starting point of so many boring conversations), to me *typhos* suggests an intimate, personal, singular limit. It is the limit of my interest in the world, in the ideas and experiences of others, and in some of my own ideas and experiences as well. *Beyond this limit*, I can make a habit of thinking, *all is smoke, vapor, typhos*.<sup>2</sup>

This essay answers the question *what is typhos?* along the egoist path already implicit in the asking.

The last paragraph in the book on the Cynics includes the author's appraisal of a contemporary interpreter, Navia:

Ancient Cynicism is not for Navia an object of “scientific” curiosity only. It is important for him as the closest approximation to the true ethical philosophy, and the salutary outlook that we in our technological culture now need most. One idea that surfaces regularly in Navia’s work is the fear that contemporary human beings have become too dependent on a system that creates and then panders to unnecessary desires and that increasingly establishes itself as the sole reality. Worse, this system of endless acquisition and consumption harbours terrible violence both to the natural environment whose dwindling resources support it, and to human beings who are progressively dehumanized, continuously pumped with ideas, beliefs and desires from the outside, and blinded by the swirling *typhos* of media images, advertisements, plastic celebrities and political cant. The only solution is to wage “war” on this system, like an Antisthenes or Diogenes, and thus not in the spirit of mere renunciation. For Navia, the true Cynic criticizes out of a deep moral idealism, and the interpretation of ancient Cynicism as wholly negative is itself a sad reflection on our own moral

impoverishment. We have, Navia argues through his scholarship, taken too little thought of the wisdom of the ancient Cynics: live simply, scorn unnecessary desires, do not follow the slavish crowd but speak the truth clearly in righteous war against untruth and, most of all, cultivate the virtue of *philanthropia* and learn to love others now, for it is from this that everything else will follow.

It is only with respect to the last two of these sentences that I will deviate from this diagnosis. And my deviation might mark the specifically egoist appropriation of this idea, which opens out soon enough onto the appropriation of a more well-known set of concepts. Unlike the Cynic *as imagined in this passage*, the egoist sometimes does not seem righteous. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pin “moral idealism” on an egoist. For them, war on untruth may seem like a losing proposition. And the virtue of *philanthropia*, if it is to be something other than a very old religious injunction, must be practiced according to one’s own needs.<sup>3</sup> The specific problem to be considered here is: given that love for self and love for *some* others is of concern to an egoist, what happens when it is troubled, not to say undone, rendered impossible, by a *technological system* of some sort ... ?

*One half of humanity laughs at the other half...  
and the egoist, who does not believe in Humanity,  
laughs in another way...<sup>4</sup>*

Let me begin again from a slightly different place: those who consider themselves Humanity, the People, unconfessed egoists and secret egoists alike—most everyone dismisses the egoist for some reason or another. The moralistic criticism that dismisses egoists as selfish is a barely thought through prejudice, a dull way of begging the question of morality. But as the following dialogue will illustrate, one can pass from that criticism to a more interesting critique. Imagine a dialogue between a Normal<sup>5</sup> and an egoist:

NORMAL. You only think of yourself, you do not understand the world as I do, empathetic and well-informed...

EGOIST. But what if I, and a few people I know, are the only real people? What if there is no 'real world'?

NORMAL. See what ridiculous things your egoism has led you to believe!

**EGOIST.** You are the one who believes in too many things, the world first of all.

**NORMAL.** Ah! That is why you only think of your own affairs! You don't even know that the world is out there! You should pay more attention to the news, learn more about the world around us ...

An egoist ought to enjoy the challenge of responding to the more interesting (because more exaggerated) critique that diagnoses him as a solipsist, switching from the moral to the epistemological register to win one for the Normals. (This switch might emerge from the incredulity with which amoral positions are received. The Normals understand morality and immorality very well, and are usually eager to diagnose them. When someone claims to have slipped out of the net of morality, the response is usually to diagnose them as immoral; when that does not work, we get the switch at stake here, which buttresses the moralistic perspective by proposing that the amoral one just doesn't perceive the world as it is—which, of course, is a disguised way of saying *doesn't perceive things as one ought*.)

The egoist is accused of thinking, of acting as if she is the only one in the world. (This translates the assertion that there is no World into the parlance of the Normals.) If this accusation of solipsism is more worth my time than that of selfishness, it is because it is a real critique, not the barely disguised manifestation of a moral prejudice. Though still moralistic at

its core, this critique has to do with desire or will: the way that one does or does not reach out beyond oneself, and who or what one embraces as one's concern.

Why would an egoist deny the World? Why minimize one's concerns?

### 3

Suppose that what Debord, and Tiqqun after him, wrote about the spectacle, is relevant to these questions. Suppose that most interpersonal relations are mediated (governed, controlled) by images. Suppose that in some sense our efforts to express ourselves and our discourse, precise and well-honed though we may make it, are always occluded by a wash of images in rapid succession. Suppose the spectacle, its stupidity. It is not primarily that the images are representations, or fakes, for that matter, that is at stake; but that they are vectors for the communication of stupidity and confusion in the guise of information and dialogue.

*Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the fictitious speakers [interlocuteurs] who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities.<sup>6</sup>*

What concern could an egoist possibly have for such one-way communication? Amusement alone, it seems to me. And good taste dictates that amusement comes to an end soon enough. After that comes the World: for what others call the World is the detritus of my amusement. Their concern for the World is not mine, because I cease to make the image-wash my concern when I am no longer amused.

I have said the same thing in two different ways: if the idea of spectacle makes sense, it is because I feel the imposition of technologically generated image flows, vectors of stupidity, whose potential to amuse is limited. I am offered something other than persons in the image-wash: crude masks, delayed gratification, promises of future connection, friendship, community, belonging... there is no one there.

... the demand for sensational news becomes translated into repetition. The all-too-well-known phenomena of saturation, of boredom, of lightning transitions from interest to tedium, produce techniques aimed at overcoming those very reactions: techniques of *presentation*. Ways are found of varying the way news is presented. 'Presence' itself, which is used to epitomize authenticity, becomes a technological construct, a mystification.

[...]

Facts, ideas—what ideas there are—and subjects come back again and again. No one recognizes

them. Non-recognition is organized technically to combat memory and previously acquired information. The confusion between triviality which no longer appears trivial and sensationalism which is made to appear ordinary is cleverly organized.<sup>7</sup>

While others, inasmuch as they pass rapidly from image to image, might be said to have a short attention span, I might be said to have a short span for extending my concern beyond my own affairs. That is amusement, nothing more.

Repetition, *image-wash*... It was probably not the intention of Debord or the other spectacle-theorists to critique the mass media alone. The spectacle was not television, and is not the internet. It is, wrote Debord after Marx, a kind of social relation, a relation of minimum autonomy and endless buffeting, corralling, controlling through images. It is a grammar and a semiotic. It is a relation of *power*: *one-way communication* is *asymmetrical*, always in my disfavor. For an egoist what is at stake is less the question of mediation (to which I will return later) than the massive asymmetry as well as just the massiveness, the technologically enhanced powers of the masses.

It seems to me that those who came up with the concept of spectacle, and most of those who continue to use it (along with most theories of ideology, dominant discourses, and so on), could be judged to have diagnosed correctly much of

what goes on in societies like ours, but failed in the task of describing how one is to live if one in fact thinks things are this way. The stratagems, programs, or recipes for rupturing representation, for seizing control of public space or production, have consistently failed. What groups, milieus, or would-be communes have come into existence as a result of collectively held beliefs about resisting the spectacle increasingly rely on spectacular means to spread their message, and, if we consider social networks, to remain in existence at all. They have become massified, or rely on massification for their communications, at least.

All recognition *within* the Spectacle is only  
recognition *of* the Spectacle.<sup>8</sup>

So, as always, it falls to the egoist to take one step farther in the direction of sobriety and skepticism. And in this case that means: enough critique! I understand the problem. Intimately. But also: enough collectivist recipes for overcoming it! The spectacle theory, and its relatives, the theories-of-ideology, rely too much on these overly optimistic or naturalized justifications for forming smaller societies with others.

This is where an egoist may embrace what seems most ridiculous in her way of setting out from herself with respect to every important question:

*... we want to be great like our perversity...<sup>9</sup>*

My description of this may be couched in the form of an experiment: *embrace quasi-solipsism*.

## 4

Live as though the only people that really exist are those you have met face to face; every other person, from politicians to celebrities, internet acquaintances and the populations of distant lands, are then something like fictions or simulations. Imaginary persons. Clumsy masks. That is, it is not so much that the spectacle, ideology, or what you will distorts their appearance, messages, or reality, but that it constructs it wholesale. To live out this quasi-solipsism, I think, will be an experiment that maximizes my own autonomy.

*Never think of men except in terms of those specific individuals whose names you know.*<sup>10</sup>

Rexroth might have more exactly said: think—with concern, with care. As though beyond my face-to-face acquaintances I was surrounded by a realm of *typhos*. The milieu, groups, subcultures: relative *typhos*. Politics, entertainment, sports, consumer cultures, etc.: absolute *typhos*. The difference with the spectacle-theory is that I do not suppose any collective way out. There is not a reality hiding behind the mediatic veil. There is my fascinating solitude, my autonomy insofar as I can appropriate it; there are those few mysterious ego-to-ego re-

lations that I call friendships. That is all that is real—ethically real, so real in every other sense as well. The difficulty is not in piercing the veil of distortions, the social lie (it will never happen); the difficulty is in turning away, in becoming fascinated with what is my own, what I have made or can make my own.

Beyond that, relative *typhos* is the tenuous realm of face-to-face relations. Here I have a chance to greet another and be greeted in return, to communicate with a minimum of affinity. But it is a chance and nothing more. My neighbor's mind may be so clouded in *typhos* that her words only repeat bits and pieces of spectacular propaganda; and as a result she will never know me except as a more or less friendly mask.

But it is with absolute *typhos* that the real controversy probably lies. Here is where the judgment of others falls hardest on the egoist. Let us make their spite our own, reversing the perspective. They are, in some sense, right; I have a great indifference for the world. I do not, in the end, claim that the great masses of my continent or the populations of distant lands are not real. Nor do I claim that there is no flesh and blood human sitting in a special chair in an office in a white house. But I do suggest that for an egoist these are simply not to be considered ethical persons, because we will always and only know them through the spectacle. With respect to imaginary persons, such as the president or celebrities, this is eminently so in the sense that they are figureheads, single bodies puppeted by production teams and think tanks.

With respect to the great masses and distant populations, they exist as technologically enhanced abstractions: population data, surveys, information, opinion polls, networks ... so many Causes. Why do the Normals think of the masses or the faraway Peoples? Due to their participation in one or more social Causes. But I acknowledge no morality that would compel me to meet the population of a distant land. It would only be the taste for adventure or risk that might make me want to take steps in that direction. That aside, I remain indifferent.

Could I meet the individuals that supposedly compose these masses? If I am inclined to wander through the realm of *typhos*, I may go to meet them. There I may find relative *typhos* or, interestingly enough, other persons may surface and make themselves known. But that is something other than an end to the technology of *typhos*, the spectacle.

Why would an egoist deny the world? Because absolute *typhos* cannot be appropriated, cannot be made my own. So I *embrace quasi-solipsism*.

## 5

Could one in fact live this way? From the egoist perspective, I would say that in some way everyone already does. As always, it is the egoist who reveals the fact. It is the egoist who confesses, who admits that she sets out from herself in every circumstance that matters. The rest, the People, the Humans, the Normals, well... somewhere in them they have the same perspective. But it is occluded, obnubilated—

... *the collective tempests and social hurricanes...*<sup>11</sup>

their self-fascination is interrupted and mediated by every Cause that intrudes upon their solitary discourse.

And that mediation, that interruption, with its resultant mental fog: that is what we call *typhos*. I will conclude by noting that in proposing this egoist reconstruction of the Cynic idea of *typhos*, I have only made reference to the spectacle theory and ideology critique out of convenience, supposing their familiarity to many of my readers—not to mention their ongoing popularity. But I will note that this egoist version does not include the humanistic core that makes the spectacle theory so philosophically weak. Let me cite at some length from one of Debord's harshest critics:

What does *The Society of the Spectacle* have to say?

That market society has become separated from itself by alienating itself in spectacle, the inverted image of social reality, the ‘present model of life’ in

which we venerate our own power turned against ourselves. That this generalized separation has engendered the all-inclusive spectacular, which is ‘the real world turned upside-down’ and the ‘visible negation of life’, a negation that, in its turn, subdues living persons for its own purposes. But also that this illusion will come to an end once the ‘atomized crowd subjected to manipulations’ liberates itself by taking hold again of its own essence, which has been alienated in the fantastic form of spectacle or ideology.

[...]

... one should write ‘society’ instead of ‘humanity’, and ‘spectacle’ instead of ‘ideology’. Except for this detail of phrasing, the ‘Situationist’ discourse follows word-for-word the tracks of Hegelianism: objectification, separation, negation, reversal, reversal of the reversal. Humanity’s liberation will come about through the reuniting of what was separated: the predicate and the subject.

[...]

This modernist refresher course in an ideological form of argument advanced in the Germany of 1840—but which the human sciences have since relegated to the status of an edifying tale—rests on the idea of a generic nature, of man’s pre-existent essence. It is difficult these days to be unaware that the nature of man is not to have a nature, and that this lack of origin is precisely at the origin of the making of man, the technogenesis of the human.

Essentialist ontologies are obliged to wipe away everything that has been discovered since 1848 [...] The theological postulate of a human ‘essence’ is an inheritance of the revealed religions for which God created man after his own image, once and for all.<sup>12</sup>

The egoist idea of *typhos* allows us to learn from spectacle and ideology theory, but evades this critique. This perspective or experiment does not involve facing off a false humanity, whose relations are mediated by images, and a real humanity, with real human relations, which I will agree with Debray sounds like a ‘theological postulate’.<sup>13</sup> It contrasts the minute realm of what I can know as my own (which, in its importance to me, may be colossal) with the vast amount of deviations from my affairs that are offered to me. *Typhos* is, let me restate it, simply the limit of my interest in the world. Even if I suppose (and I more than suppose it, I think it’s so—you need not agree) that there is no human nature, and that this is tied up with the “technogenesis of the human”, I can still suspect, as an egoist, that this technogenesis seems to have gone horribly wrong, and has unleashed waves of Normality, stupidity, and typhoid confusion over the earth. Not the media, but the technology of the mass. So the earth becomes a world, egos or persons become Humanity... indeed, this suggests the Cynics only ever faced relative *typhos*. Perhaps their moral idealism and so on had to do with the sense that they could speak the truth, that it would resonate beyond them.

Not so for us. *Atyphia* seems impossible. If technogenesis means anything, it is that the human mass drags *typhos* with it, that the communication machines improve it, that we do have reason to speak of an endless interference in our affairs. It is something other than an alienation of essence! But it is absolute *typhos*. And I ask, again: why would I invest any of this with belief or interest?

Ethically, in terms of the life of an egoist, there is no Spectacle, no Society, no Thing of Things. There are my concerns, and beyond that, *typhos*.

## NOTES

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1. Desmond, *Cynics*, 244.
2. “Cynical Lessons”, in this collection.
3. I admit any egoist could have written that. With more originality, I hope, I have penned some notes on the universal injunction to love others, from an egoist perspective, in the essay called “A Lesson in Desire”, also included in this collection.
4. Old egoist saying.
5. There are Normals insofar as there are processes of normalization, powers of the norm (see what Foucault, and Macherey after him, have written on this) and they are not resisted by individuals or groups. Of course, from an egoist point of view normality has no intrinsic importance.
6. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 218.
7. Lefebvre, “Renewal, Youth, Repetition”, in *Introduction to Modernity*, 166.
8. Tiqqun, *Theory of Bloom*.

9. Novatore, “Towards the Creative Nothing”, in *Collected Writings*, 46.
10. Kenneth Rexroth.
11. Novatore, “Towards the Creative Nothing”, 44.
12. Régis Debray, “Remarks on the Spectacle”, 135-136.
13. Supposing one wants to put this in terms of the history of philosophy, one might remember that egoists follow Stirner’s way of breaking with Feuerbach, not Marx’s. If it is even a question of a break for Debord: as Debray points out, he is close to Feuerbach on a number of points.
14. Also called “the massive pleonasm”. Lefebvre, “Renewal, Youth, Repetition”, 167.

THESES  
*on the*  
SUPERIORITY  
*of the*  
DRY WIT

*"Theses on the Superiority of the Dry Wit" was written in 2005-6 and originally published as mufa::poema 005. It was first distributed at the Renewing the Anarchist Tradition gathering in 2006 and then here and there throughout Austin, Texas in the following two years. This is perhaps the place to say a word about mufa::poema. It was a micropress project that I operated from 2005 to 2011, freely distributing pamphlets of poetry and prose. The micro aspect denoted not only the small runs but also my commitment to doing all distribution face to face.*

# I

Unlike sarcasm, irony, some forms of derisive mockery, puns, and wordplays, and nearly every other form of humor, the dry wit is superior in that it is funny, but does not need to be funny.

## II

Not to need to be funny: this can, psychologically, be the *attitude* of any joker; but the dry wit is the only form of humor that expresses this disposition in its very form.

The dry wit need not succeed in being well received.

### III

The dry wit is superior, first, politically. Either it does not divide between friend and enemy, or it plays with the possibility of the division, never committing itself.

## IV

The dry wit is also superior ethically. The dry wit makes it possible to use, non-ironically, words like ‘good,’ ‘evil,’ ‘God,’ ‘reason,’ and so on. It is generous both in the direction of a possible sense of these words, and of a joker’s lack of attachment to them. That is, it doesn’t matter if you get the joke.

# V

The dry wit is superior sociologically. Whether or not you get it can never put you in a position of authority; rather, being witty drily is ex-centric. When she jokes about not getting it, a joker acknowledges graciously that the joke could be on her.

## VI

Sarcasm imitates only so as to mock. The dry wit may mock, but, like great plagiarism, it can also pay homage through imitation.

## VII

Irony, like sarcasm, distances a joker. The dry wit can be used to approximate, siding up to an odd situation, participating pragmatically without participating metaphysically.

## VIII

In the typology of forms of humor, the dry wit is closest to physical humor and slapstick, in which a joker endears himself to his audience by placing himself below and with them at once. Yet if the dry wit is superior as a form of humor, it is perhaps because slapstick and related forms are really body techniques with humorous effects rather than forms of humor strictly speaking.

## IX

The dry wit is superior, then, aesthetically. It is subtle, indirect, and beautiful. If its humor is caught, if the joke is understood, it is the funniest. If not, it was an amusing way to speak, and, as the *I Ching* says, *there is no blame*.

# X

Ultimately, the dry wit is superior because it does not take humor for granted; it does not travel obvious routes through funny common places. It is concerned, rather, with the *emergence* of humor: how a word or phrase or gesture comes to be funny.

## XI

The dry wit offers novelty, which is absurd.

## XII

The dry wit does not seek to mock absurdity. The dry wit discovers, creates, or invents absurdity. For other jokers, absurdity is worthy of mockery—but their mockery, though perhaps adding absurdity, is less funny. The joker becomes the joke. This greater absurdity goes unacknowledged in the name of maintaining authority, and in the course of time humor slips away and only a banal way of determining who or what is the scapegoat of the moment remains.

## XIII

A joker who is witty drily generates lovely self-conscious absurdity, and the awkwardness of that consciousness, in addition to being absurd, is funniest.



**NOTES *on* NOTHING**

*A sketch from 2006: condensation of a difficult thought process.*

“either way” = **invisible ground of sympathy**—¿o no?  
(¿que no?)

*invisible ground* = that any way leads there, starts out from there ...

*of sympathy* = (though nothing analytic about it)—that something nevertheless is accumulated that way

In some interrelated way, we, you, us, them, sharing in a circulation—in affects, nevertheless,—ungroundedly we position, play at positioning, ourselves—

And readings and markings which we say mark the way.  
They don’t. They do—half of the way.

Invisible, inaudible ground of sympathy. Of sympathy that would be “ground” for some desublimation—“in their worlds.”

the ‘world’ is full of anticlimax and repetition. Novelty is not based on laws of physics as most understand them. It ‘is’ something like a secret principle.

That **PLANETARY INTERLUDE** from the upper case—unbounded, unlimited, not uni- or mono-, but not transcendent, either. No hidden world or secret path. Start anywhere.

The tattoo could say **BREATHE OR LIVE**. Or **SLEEP OR WANDER**.

Maybe it is an affectation. But then, who is not affected?

These tired scenes, and then thinking, how/when does phantasy break through, still being phantasy, no reverie, becoming nomás? &c.

An affectation that would under some special circumstance communicate:

you, too, affected!

&c.

Who is not affected, like **LECTURE ON NOTHING**.

The idea is to understand these phrases without substantialization.

Substantialization would be something like:

a super-important super-substance

that can ‘be’ nothing.

a super-important super-subject

who can ‘be’ who.

Gamers gaming, trying to get out of game. Trying to get out of game is certainly not “too serious” for game. Less, much less, serious, in fact.

**POINTS *on* TIME *and* HISTORY**

*This text incorporates both (as its upper half) the theses on duration I wrote for the 2012 BASTARD conference, the theme of which was time, and (as its lower half) the handwritten notes I elaborated so as to perform the theses without merely reading them. My later attempt to combine upper and lower halves into a single prose text resulted, eventually, in the essay "History as Decomposition", published first in Attentat and more recently in The Impossible, Patience. The message that accompanied the original submission to the BASTARD organizers read as follows:*

In the spirit of what the Situationists called 'parodic seriousness,'  
so as to suggest ways to distinguish the interesting  
and the boring in anarchist practice,  
and,  
above all,  
amorally,  
I have composed a new set of Theses for the first  
time in seven years, and  
I would like to propose and defend them publicly at  
your conference.

*At the conference, to set the proper tone for the theses, I read parts of a poem which is presented in the following pages in its entirety. I have underlined the excerpts I recall reading out loud (and I invite readers to read them, or the entire poem, out loud before moving on). The entire piece is thought from the freedom staged in the poem.*

## STRETCHING IT WIDER

*John Giorno*

Some things  
that work  
in one  
decade,  
don't work  
in the next,  
so mark  
it down  
as a noble  
idea  
that failed.

And I did  
what everybody  
dreams  
of doing.  
I walked  
away  
from it  
I walked away  
from it  
I walked away from it

I walked away from it,  
and I never  
went back,  
without reconcile.

And since I  
can't leave,  
I love  
getting drunk  
with you  
I love getting  
drunk with you,  
I love getting drunk with you,  
and give me some  
more blow.

Nobody  
ever gives  
you what  
you want  
except by mistake,  
and the only  
things you  
ever got  
is what  
you did for yourself,

cause you  
hate them  
and you're only  
doing it  
everyday  
for the money,  
you hate them  
and you're only doing it  
everyday for the money.

I know guys  
who work  
all their  
life  
and have got  
a lot,  
and something  
happens to him,  
and he loses  
everything  
just like that,  
and I haven't  
even got  
that  
and I haven't even got that.

Hard  
work,  
low  
pay,  
and embarrassing  
conditions,  
you are worse  
than I remember,  
and you're  
home  
and you're home  
and you're home  
and you're home  
and you're home.

What is  
a rat doing,  
when it  
isn't eating  
garbage  
or scaring you  
on the street,  
they're laying  
around  
like pussy cats,  
you and I

sleeping in  
the bed sheets,  
warm  
and cozy,  
sliding  
your legs  
under the covers  
and staying there.

You got to keep  
down  
cause they're shooting  
low,  
press your body  
against the ground,  
it's gravity,  
the telephone  
hasn't rung  
once today.

If there is  
one thing  
you cannot  
and will not  
do  
is make

this world  
a better  
place,  
if there's one thing  
you can't do  
is make the world  
a better place,  
if there's one thing  
you're not going to do  
is make the world a better place.

Cause you are  
only successful  
when you  
rip  
somebody off,  
and everybody  
I've ever known  
who wants to  
help somebody,  
wants to help  
themselves  
and I'm a firm  
believer in  
giving somebody

enough rope  
to hang themselves.

You're standing here  
watching all  
these people,  
and everything seems  
a little  
confused  
and everything seems  
a little confused,  
I haven't got  
anything to say.

The noose  
is tightening  
the noose is tightening  
the noose is tightening,  
and let me make  
one more  
further  
observation,  
when you  
die,  
you're going to die  
with a hard-on.

If I didn't  
have an  
accident  
I wouldn't  
be here  
If I didn't have  
an accident  
I wouldn't be here  
If I didn't have an accident  
I wouldn't be here.

Then there is  
the reality  
of the family,  
your mother  
and father,  
them and  
my mistakes  
is why  
I'm sitting  
at a table  
with a bunch  
of stupid  
jerks  
on Thanksgiving

eating  
a turkey  
stuffed  
with lasagna.

I'm spending  
my whole  
life  
being with  
people  
I don't want  
to be with  
I'm spending my whole  
life being with people  
I don't want to be with  
I'm spending my whole life  
being with people  
I don't want to be with,  
and there ain't  
no such thing  
as family,  
just people  
you work with.

I love  
completely

perverted  
people,  
you are my  
best  
sexual  
fantasy,

I never got  
that far with  
scat  
before  
and I want to  
remember it,  
tireless  
and I want to remember it,  
tireless  
and I want to remember it, tireless.

We make money  
the old-fashioned  
way  
we earn it,  
the anchor  
man  
never leaves  
the building,

and the only  
difference  
between me  
and a preacher  
is he's  
telling you  
he has a way  
out,  
and I'm telling you  
don't bother,  
for you  
there is  
no way  
out  
for you there  
is no way out  
for you there is no  
way out  
for you there is no way out,  
and it isn't  
as though  
you got anything  
to lose.

Besides they  
blocked

permanently  
all  
the exits  
they blocked permanently  
all the exits,  
you and I  
get to  
stay here  
forever  
and it gets  
worse  
beyond your  
imagination.

I would like  
to give my  
best  
to all sentient  
beings,  
and before  
I die,  
I'd like  
to de-tox  
my mind  
and tame  
delusion,

but we are not  
in a time  
appropriate  
to do this.

Tonight,  
I want you  
to give us  
some drugs  
and a little  
alcohol,  
if something  
is good  
people  
like it  
if something is good  
people like it  
if something is good  
people like it.

It looks  
the way  
it should  
and you make me  
feel good,  
so let's

open it  
up,  
stretching it  
wider  
stretching  
it wider  
stretching it wider  
stretching it wider  
stretching it–  
wider,  
and it shouldn't be  
any trouble.

# 1

The rejection of measured and meaningful time by anarchists is the outcome of a still partial critique.

---

Those who made it their task to criticize and attack every suggestion of measured and meaningful time:  
clock time, the time of discipline,  
'commodity-time', spectacular time,  
the autobiographical, developmental time  
of the self  
and of historical narratives,  
and many other crude simplifications/  
impositions  
were right!

But I want to talk about what we are to think about what is left after the critique of time;

---

Or, when we say NO FUTURE, how we prevent this from becoming a slogan

(fortunately, it has already been a slogan, we are just repeating it. First time as tragedy and second time as farce, thank good taste!) ...

we prevent it like this, no great meaning, no assumption that tomorrow will be better or more meaningful than today, or even happen.

But! Also, if tomorrow happens, tomorrow will be NO FUTURE.

## 2

In some very strange sense, duration is real enough, as novelty. New things happen all the time, weirdly, meaninglessly. This irruption is sometimes what we mean by anarchy.

---

I do not think the experience of new things happening is delusional. Of course it can be stupid, or based on distraction, or impatient, and there may be ethical discussions to be had about that. But I find too much interest in novelty to abandon it to time.

What is novelty after the critique of time? The weird, meaningless way in which things happen.

Meaningless: it is very difficult to tell, it is probably impossible to tell, what is a remarkable event (singular, irreversible, important) and what is talked about that way in a tem-

---

poral or historical narrative. So I say things happen meaninglessly.

= There is something terrifying in this statement, but also something neutral/boring, and something wonderful, the nakedness of events.

Weirdly: the way in which events request or attract meaning, as though the world wanted to mean something to us, as though there is a desire for me to give it meaning, is weird. Seen backwards or upside-down, this was known to speakers of old English as the Wyrd, meaning something like destiny.

---

- = I see destiny, thought crudely, as the sense that my life (if I am very superstitious, credulous) is leading somewhere; I see it, thought crudely but still in the grips of religion, politics and morality, as the idea that history has to go in a certain direction, or that some peoples are fated to be in history and others not ...
- ± I see the Weird as the passion of what happens meaninglessly, to affirm what happens as if it were fate/destiny, knowing nothing guides this happening.

---

I call the weird, meaningless way in which things happen, and those happenings last, duration. I really don't care if duration is the Ultimate real; it is, experientially, real enough.

(I mean this in the same sense that I know I am not the King of my Royal experience; but my experience is Royal enough, real enough... )

Anarchy, beyond politics, but also beyond a realist justification related to chaos or what-not, is probably just this, the feedback loop in me between the irruption of events

---

around me and the irruption-event that I seem to myself to be.

Anarchy as collusion; anarchy as conspiracy.

# 3

Duration is real enough as the barely articulable messy passage of everyday life, usually experienced as boredom, with its interesting side glimpsed as an Outside often mistaken for timelessness.

---

Another take on duration is to think about the violence of time, the violence of discipline or work, for example, the violence they do to our *aesthesia*, or perception, our bodies and their faculties, or the way that measured and meaningful time produces experience for and in us.

---

Brief history of the clock in four points:

1. in the ancient world, a toy;
2. in the medieval world, a way to structure = produce time in monasteries: rhythm of inner experience, discipline of soul and body;
3. in the early modern world, a way to structure = produce time in workshops and eventually factories: rhythm of external or exteriorized experience, discipline of body and soul;
4. today, clocks everywhere! control...

It is not that if we removed the discipline or smashed the clocks we would have the natural flow of experience (but it would not be a bad place to start).

---

We can still find the barely articulable messy  
passages of duration in everyday life. The  
first clue is boredom.

The second is amusement.

They can both be ecstasies ...

Neither of these can be produced by the ma-  
chines of discipline, of time; they are acci-  
dents. I am also this accident, or so I seem to  
myself to be; that is the root of my non-be-  
longing to the Cause.

---

Anarchy has to do with this accidental character of duration. Anarchy is kind of impersonal!

But one can't make or plan anarchy, and certainly not organize it.

- = It may be going on now, and we may know it or not ...
- = It may happen in the quasi-future.

History as a meaningful process is a nightmare or hallucination, a way of narrating what we usually mean by time, and rarely relevant to what we mean by anarchy.

---

The meaning of history: not progress, not for me, probably not for us. Spirit as possession by a Spirit, a Geist/Ghost inhabiting the psyches and bodies of humans and forcing us to do its will.

Mystically, it is a cruel demon. And our little souls are *daimons*, tutelary spirits that teach cruel lessons.

Less mystically, it is us, our cruelty to ourselves. Either way history is personal. Either my personal inclusion in it, a generation, a decade, a century, a historical movement I relate to, to connect with or reject, etc. Or

---

my personal rejection from it, history passing me by, etc.

We can learn from this, but it is also necessary to abandon it for the impersonal nature of anarchy.

In ourselves too.

Duration without history means: things keep happening.

In ourselves too.

# 5

A sense of weird, meaningless duration can be detached from history. For us this amounts to an anarchist recreation or pastime, the discovery of every kind of rupture and discontinuity in duration.

---

Many ideas of history include an end to history. Hegel, Marx... the bourgeois democratic state or communism as the final stage, already happened or to come.

Stages are what I mean when I say meaning... everything dull and horrendous about a passage of duration is in the stage of history; everything interesting falls out of the stage, is untimely...

... is weird, meaningless duration. Where did so-and-so come from? Where did I come from?

---

Our pastimes, amusing or boring, are study or participation in ruptures. They are not discovering but inventing answers to where I came from.

How do I become the one about whom I or anyone says: *where did he come from?*

Perfecting the mask ...

# 6

Partial critique is not coincidentally but necessarily tied to a historical conception of progress and so not very interesting. This includes the impatient critique of time, which conceals or sometimes openly proclaims a demand for timelessness.

---

[It seems right to reject time if this throws us outside of measure and meaning, but without some sense of duration, we risk re-entering human time, or, worse, invoking divine or cosmic duration as its basis.]

We will re-enter human time; maybe we always do. This conversation at the Austin Anarchist Reading group was amusing in its absurdity:

- A. ... we burn it all down and start over.
- B. What if civilization and history just go and begin again? Not that they had to

---

(mutation, random swerve), but the same weird thing repeats?

- A. We burn it all down and start over!
- B. !!!

But it is the same mistake to think we re-enter natural or cosmic time, the real time as opposed to the fake time of history. It is the other way around: civilization and its history is all too real, it is Royal; the Outside of boredom or amusement is fake, bad copy, and that is messy, and that is weird duration.

Events and their masks! We wear masks because events happen in a signifying way:

---

they perceive or point to each other and we  
want to be the detectives of that ... the mask  
of the detective ...

A total critique admits many weird durations, but rejects progress and history: no future, which is very interesting, since anything can happen next and have nothing to do with the future.

---

So total critique, which I invoke parodically, works if it shatters time into many weird durations.

Events and their masks!

Events as signs of non-events, of quasi-futures to come!

The reduplication of copies: this is interesting. It demands study. It is like the genres of music, or like the proliferation of labels for political positions. We all know it means very little. Can we play this little game so that we are the masters?

---

I think we can if we say that these are all masks, masks for unnamable events, masks for us in or as the events ... (the mask is how I am an event).

Only partially overlapping weird durations.

Uncanny; real enough.

Insofar as weird durations are real enough and the cosmos does not care about us, something may happen next: meaningless, we call it the quasi-future.

---

For some amount of time, inside History and in a religious frame of mind, some of us supposed that duration was moving at a human pace, and events unfolding at a human scale.

But the cosmos does not care about us! Events unfold without us. This is either amusing or boring, but it is certainly not meaningful.

We have credulous stories that try to grip cosmic time and place us in meaningful relation to it, but they are harmful stories, harmful to me, first of all.

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= Quasi-futures. Yes, let's call them that, the durations to come, the other as yet unknown durations. They are to come enough to be futures, but in the sense of the Future we said No to, or of, they are fakes, parodies, bad copies. Quasi-futures.

We do not hope for a better future,  
but study and participate in the  
irruption of strange quasi-futures.

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[The entire question is what constitutes a  
rupture in practice.]

NO FUTURE, not as a slogan but in the amusing way we may come to say it tomorrow, would have to be a way to be done with hope as well as fear.

When I say NO FUTURE I am not highlighting despair.

= Challenge to my friends the nihilists: there is no necessary connection between nihilism and despair, or depression, or any other dark emotion.

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{It is a bit the way the word ‘bitter’ is used to refer to certain kinds of experiences, but the bitter taste of certain greens is hardly something I want to avoid.}

Nihilism, if that is part of what is invoked by and as NO FUTURE, could also be the lightest feeling, the end of a certain moralizing story about who I am and what I need to be doing.

{Remember that when I, the egoist, break with the cause that gives my life meaning, there is always a representative of the Cause

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there to say that without the Cause, no  
FUTURE.}.

Despair, depression, metaphors of darkness,  
negativity in any sense but a logical one, all  
that is an aesthetic evaluation from my point  
of view.

It is a popular evaluation, but that is all. It  
is not right, it is not accurate, it is certainly  
not good.

There are nihilist smiles...

The only thing worth hoping for is amusement in the meaningless quasi-future.

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- = Second challenge to my friends: I think hope is dangerous, it is in bad taste, etc. One mistake is to think that hopelessness is despair, passivity, inaction. Quite the contrary. It is a bizarre freedom that knows not to wait (there is nothing to wait for, NO FUTURE).
- = Other mistake is to take any of this too seriously. Result: it is pleasant to be in bad taste a little bit and hope. But let's not waste time hoping for a better world, unity, peace, freedom, all that business. We either construct whatever parts of that we can or we give up hoping for them ... or

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probably both at once. But we can be in  
bad taste a little and hope for amusement.  
Why not? It will be pleasant.

Something amusing will happen, or not, it is  
indifferent. ...

= We study and participate in the irruption  
of strange quasi-futures.

That is anarchy, which only exists in its many  
personal masks, or impersonally.



**FAILURE, RESISTANCE**

*An intervention into a discussion between friends in an anarchist circular that will remain nameless. The topic was the idea that anarchists are married to failure and wear it as a badge of pride. It appeared in 2012.*

# 1

There is a tremendous difference, so I say, between a marriage to failure and a commitment to know one's resistance.

Revolt, insurrection, revolution, all that, so I suppose, is done because one can, because one wills it, desires it, wants it.

Resistance, what I call resistance, is involuntary. One can recognize it, or not; but it is not chosen. It's wild.

I think that their relation, if they have any, is awfully difficult to understand.

I also think that revolt and the other two tend to be accomplished in groups, crowds, mobs, maybe organizations; and that resistance, what I call resistance, is on the whole a solitary affair.

Though it may be shared; and it may be witnessed.

# 2

Let us think about moral attitudes to failure.

I take my distance from the world view of slaves who identify with their masters, who define success as being in the place of their masters. That has nothing to do with the beautiful idea.

As these Normals discover that they will never be masters, they console themselves by believing themselves to be better than their masters.

Fever dream of moraline addicts.

In their failure they think themselves good. Thus does failure become attractive (the Good attracts). Thus does surrogate activity, biding time before and during failure in the greater undertaking, become absorbing.

I know that one difference between my outlook and that of the slaves in their hope is that they either ignore their failures (so many narcissistic wounds) or falsely claim to have learned from them (so failure informs surrogate activity, and all activity, as hard work, is good, proof of the moral superiority of the slaves).

This latter falsity is evident in that the lesson they claim to have learned leads them to do the same thing again a while later, sometimes in another place or with other people, sometimes not even that.

It is certainly fair to call that, and laziness, underachieving.

The polemical idea of our milieu as one of underachievers absorbed in surrogate activities, or decimated by laziness, is compelling. We are too many of us still attracted by the Good, or governed by the Norms.

Too civilized.

But we would be mistaken, I think, if we left it at this, saying that it is one thing to be a subculture of underachiev-

ers and another to win all the time by achieving. That is not how I define my orientation to the beautiful idea. I do not draw the line between achievement and non-achievement, nor between failure and success.

I do not draw any line. But I wish to know my resistance, what in me is wild enough. So I take the view that in failure and so-called underachievement I might discern, among other traits, that of my resistance. In laziness, even.

### 3

Now let me say something about the psychology of failure.

I think that sometimes when we try to do something and fail, we are succeeding despite ourselves, accomplishing something else entirely. Successfully resisting, I mean, giving resistance its share, allowing that in us which will not budge its due. That in us which is wildly stubborn, the source of many a slip and parapraxis. What are called mistakes.

A break in the absorption of surrogate activities.

Wake up from the fever dream, cold sweat.

I mean that sometimes what we are trying to do when we do something, we are trying to do inasmuch as the Good is attractive, or the Norms are governing. When we fail, we might not have been good enough (which is where the patch-up job of *ressentiment* takes over); or we might have been resisting.

So I need to drive a wedge into this category of under-achievers.

What one can will to do, one should do, if one can, if one wills. Achieve, succeed, win, if you can.

What I cannot but do—resist—is that wherein I have something to learn. In my resistance I am singular.

In my resistance I am singular: this would be what in me is irreducible to the effects of power, because it is negative, failure to perform. It repels the Good.

But I will not rejoice, morally, over failure as proof of authenticity. Nor write a book in praise of laziness. I am more inclined to recognize my resistance and so my singularity in what seems (to the Good and the Normals) inauthentic, mask-like, sneaky, fake, resisting or refusing recognition.

## 4

So resistance, its trait, is not known positively, but in the way it breaks with a relation, pushes back, refuses the bond.

(You know, we used to call that trait, that wild singularity, the ego, but I figure everyone is impatient with that by now.)

In any case, that is what I commit to knowing and to living: an unconscious cunning in me that is oriented towards the beautiful idea, and not the Good or the Norms.

It accomplishes this orientation, so I suppose, by resisting whatever would disorient me from it.



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How to live *now*, meaning exigent ethical matters, possible ways of life. How to live *never*, meaning that consideration of such matters is obscured, dark,

*they  
blocked  
permanently  
all  
the exits*

said Giorno. *Or, always,* because we survive in the weird oscillation between the two. The path seems to be, then, to index resistance, prizing wit.

A. de A.



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